

# GATE ゲート

自衛隊  
彼の地にて、  
斯く戦えり

2. 炎龍編

柳内たくみ

Illustration: 黒獅子  
Yanai Takumi

上



アルファポリス文庫

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上







「勘弁してくれつ」

「やめよつ、まで、やめてくれ！  
までつ、痛い！  
ゆ、指を折るな。  
ぐひつ、あべつ、ぐふ……」

「はい、隊長♪」

「栗林君。喋りたくなるように  
してあげなさい」

## Chapter 1

The Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada awoke after a long sleep.

She immediately opened her study to the light of dawn. As the shutters were swung back, the morning sun shone on her face and made her squint.

The Imperial capital was two days inland by foot from the shores of the Azure Sea. The sunlight was strong, but the cool wind blowing down from the glacial north made it comfortable instead.

The Imperial Palace was located on the easternmost of the Imperial Capital's five hills, on the slopes of Sadela Hill.

One of the mansions in the palace's east wing was hers. It was well ventilated, and the wind brought the fragrant scent from the cypress trees in the eastern forest over to her. Piña loved the way it cleared her head when she breathed it in.

“Your Highness, you didn’t sleep in your bed again,” Hamilton grumbled as she opened each of the windows to the study.

Piña was wearing a garment that people in this world called a “Tunic”, and her upper body was sprawled over her desk as though she had jumped out over it.

The desk was covered with all manner of books, as well as letters from many places. Most of them were made of parchment, but recently, they had started using photocopy paper bought from the Arnus Living Community (ALC).

“Ah, I messed up...”

She hurriedly tried to smooth out the parchment she had crumpled in her sleep. It was a financial report from House Formal. She must have fallen asleep while reading it.

A closer look at her fingers revealed ink stains there. While she managed not to get her clothes and face dirty, her clothes were crumpled and her body and face felt uncomfortable.

“Your Highness, why not have a bath before you have breakfast?”

“Sorry. We’ll go with that,” Piña said, throwing her hands up in surrender after hearing Hamilton.

“For today’s schedule, the more important events are lunch with Lord Cicero of the Senate, and the dinner party to celebrate the birthday of Marquis Ducie’s daughter. Between lunch and dinner, Shandy wishes to speak with you. I think she wants to recommend candidates for the next leader of the White Rose Knights.”

“I think Panache and Shandy swore a vow of sisterhood, right? Doesn’t that mean Shandy Cuff will be the next leader of the White Rose Knights?”

“Perhaps she does not wish to be the leader, but wants to go with Panache to Arnus instead?”

Piña wrinkled her immaculate forehead with a frown. If she wanted to repay the trust placed in her by her own sworn sister, wouldn’t it be better for her to stay and manage the knights? What on earth was she thinking, suddenly saying that she was sick of the knight band’s traditions and rules? If it was really like Hamilton said, she could not agree just like that. In any case, she would meet Shandy first and decide what to do about her later.

“Today, Sugawara-sama will meet Lord Cicero, and then there’s the Ducie house party, mm.”

“This is the namelist for the first batch of prisoners to be released. Arrange to have the relatives of those on the list to attend the party, and then Sugawara-sama will hand the namelist to the various family representatives. Would you like to go over the draft for the list?”

“Ah~ I saw it last night. I think they arranged for 15 people to be released, but I only see 14 names here. Why is there an empty space?

Just as Piña was thinking about looking for the needed documents among the huge piles on her desk, a stack of them fell over onto her bed like a rockslide.

“Ah~ah...”

After stopping the Princess from doing it herself, Hamilton went to clear up the mess.

“Your Highness... the empty space on the namelist is an enticement for Lord Cicero. I believe his nephew was among the prisoners taken by the JSDF. In order to increase the chances of success for our meeting today, I decided to leave room for him to be included in the first batch.

Piña grabbed her head and contemplated Hamilton’s words. She did not know if her memory had reached its capacity, or if she just could not think any more.

“Are you alright? You look tired.”

“If I said I’m not alright, would you take my place?”

“You know I can’t...”

“Then, it just means I have to work harder, right?”

Piña rolled up a document and pressed it on Hamilton's chest before leaving to take a bath.

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After her bath, she tied her red hair up again, put on some light makeup, and got dressed. After these preparations, Piña finally showed up at the breakfast table, about an hour after being woken by Hamilton. It was already quite fast considering the time noble ladies normally took to ready themselves.

That being said, Sugawara Kouji had still waited for quite a while before Piña showed up, and he had helped himself to breakfast first. The menu was hot barley porridge with meat jerky, as well as some citrus fruits.

Piña's mansion had a lot of maids, and they ensured that he would not be inconvenienced in any way. Sugawara was wearing their formal wear, known as a toga, in order not to cause any problems. However, if Piña was not around, he could not do any work.

Diplomacy began by meeting the other party. He did not know anyone else in the Imperial Capital, so no matter who he met, he would need Piña to introduce him. The reason why Sugawara had been sent over as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Special Region Incident Response Committee was to increase their presence in the Imperial Capital. His job was to build relationships with people here, make preparations for the true negotiations

team that would be sent out, hone his proficiency with the local language, and keep a firm grasp on the movers and shakers of Imperial society.

“Good morning, Your Highness.”

“Good morning, Sugawara-dono. You’re early as always.”

*You’re the one who’s late,* Sugawara thought as he swallowed those words while complimenting Piña with the pretty words he used for business encounters. It was a trick he had learned while studying in France, and it seemed to work quite well on the ladies here.

When Piña sat at the table, she only had a little porridge and some fruit. The breakfast before her seemed to be as bland as possible to reduce the strain on her stomach. The reason for this reduction in intake will soon be explained.

“We’re having lunch at Lord Cicero’s house and then a dinner feast at the Ducie home. Frankly speaking, one does not have enough stomachs for that.”

It seemed that the trouble related to receptions were the same everywhere. Sugawara had only come here after accumulating a lot of similar experiences, so he fully agreed with her.

“Our country has a saying, a healthy body begins with one’s stomach. Although, it is difficult to preserve one’s belly in this line of work, so it’s

fairly troublesome.”

“Ah~”

For women in particular, diet had a significant effect on their skin, bodies and looks.

Piña seemed to be contemplating these topics when Sugawara said to her, “My country makes good stomach medicine. Would you like me to provide some for you?”

“Please, by all means. Thank you, thank you very much.”

In the Empire, feasts were events where one had to be prepared to eat and drink a lot. There were almost no other entertainments besides that, and in the case of Japan, preparing an appropriate amount of food and alcohol was also to be expected. The problem on this side of the Gate was that the “appropriate amount” was very large, which proved troublesome.

Naturally, Lord Cicero’s luncheon was a luxurious one.

There were meatballs made of mutton, soup made from fish and vegetables, as well as large quantities of fowl, fish, beast and other vegetables.

The fruits were chilled with snow from the mountain slopes, and the variety of food, as well as the quantity, was quite impressive. Guests over here showed their politeness by eating, and unfinished food was a sign of a good welcome.

It was all thanks to Princess Piña that he could receive such a warm welcome. If Sugawara had tried going it alone, he might have just gotten a basin of cold water dumped on his head instead.

Cicero La Maltose was a member of the Maltose family, one of the founders of the Empire. However, it was merely a branch of a famous family, and it was among the lowest-ranked among the Imperial peerage. However, he had exceptional debating and leadership abilities, and as a Senator, he had a significant amount of political pull. Since there were other Maltoses in the Senate, they called him Lord Cicero to avoid confusion.

In this war, he belonged to the Imperial, pro-war faction. In other words, he was a champion of the idea that “Since this is an emergency, we should gather the Empire’s strength and reconstitute the Legions under the Emperor, and drive the barbarians of Arnus away with military force!”

In opposition to them were the Senatorial, pro-peace faction. They proposed that “Since this was started by the foolish actions of the Emperor, we should transfer his power to the Senate and rebuild our army under them. At the same time, we should make contact with the enemies in Arnus and ask them

to return to the other side of the Gate by means other than violence.”

Cicero had been chosen for negotiations because he was a member of the pro-war faction who could still be reasoned with.

The pro-peace faction wanted peace at any cost, but there were far too few of them. Therefore, the plan was to try and lure away some of the pro-war nobles to the pro-peace side.

Sugawara explained this to Piña, and then asked her to introduce a suitable person to him. Based on her previous experiences, she had chosen Cicero.

“Lord Cicero, may I present to you his Excellency Sugawara Kouji, an ambassador of the land called Japan.”

Piña had artificially inflated Sugawara’s status. Sugawara, knowing what she intended, did not correct her.

“Pleased to meet you,” both sides said as they greeted each other.

With a haughty attitude, Cicero said, “Forgive me, but I know of no such country called Japan. May I know what is it like?”

The Empire was a powerful nation. It had over a dozen vassal kingdoms to begin with, and when one counted allied nations and rural tribes which banded together to form a country, it had ties with over a hundred other

domains. Cicero might have been a Senator, but he was no diplomat, so it was understandable that there were countries which he did not know

“How shall I put it... Japan is a land of four seasons, with beautiful mountains and rivers.”

As he heard this, Cicero snorted in quiet laughter. His wife looked at him with an oafish look on her face and shrugged.

He had asked the ambassador of a primitive backwater nation about his land, and the answer he had received was some nonsense about a beautiful country. In other words, hardly an answer.

At a glance, Sugawara seemed like he might be talented, but ultimately he was a farm-born plebeian. It would be a long time before he could match wits with an Imperial patrician. That was Cicero’s opinion of Sugawara. Well, it was not his fault that his country was backward. Cicero prided himself on fairness, and therefore he would raise his low opinion of Sugawara by a notch or two... or at least, he planned to do so.

Piña was watching from the side, and she could see right through Cicero.

She sighed in annoyance and quietly thought about saying, “Be more careful, you’re playing right into his hands...” But she was just an intermediary, and not a proper diplomat, so she did not speak out.

“I brought some gifts from my country with me. Please accept them.”

Now there would be a show of presenting gifts. Sugawara snapped his fingers. Piña’s servants, as well as Sugawara’s JSDF escort, Sergeant Naoe, began bringing in the gift boxes.

Cicero’s cold smile warmed up into a genuine smile.

Piled before Cicero were bolts of beautifully embroidered cloth, silk from Kyoto’s Nishijin district, stitched with colored thread of gold and silver, black and red Kanazawa lacquerware, intricately decorated works of art, brightly embroidered folding fans, and Satsuma Kiriko glassware.

There were cultured pearls from Shima, of which a legendary craftsman once said, “if only I could decorate all the necks of the world’s women with these”. There was also a katana made by Kansai swordsmiths.

Then there were reams of wagami paper, western-style writing paper as well as fountain pens and other writing instruments. They were handy tools that one could hardly bear to set down.

In addition, there were eating utensils made of gold, silver, ceramic and porcelain.

This was a display of Japan's artistry and useful rarities.

Piña was used to seeing Sugawara at work over the past few days. He would begin with a humble attitude, and then display attractive objects, in order to make people want to keep talking to him. It was precisely because Cicero was a patrician of good taste that he understood the technological ability needed to produce the things he saw before him.

Cicero's wife was distracted by the vividly-colored Nishijin silk and the embroidered cloth. Cicero himself was enchanted by the beautiful curve of the katana. Although he was known as a politician who was skilled in debate, he was still a man, and he was naturally drawn to the weapon first.

“These are marvellous, were they all made in Japan?”

“Indeed, they were all produced by the craftsmen of my country.”

“What manner of country is Japan that produces such wonderful objects? Forgive me, it seems I looked down on you earlier.”

Cicero's attitude had changed. He cast away his initial arrogance and replaced it with an equivalent amount of respect. His attitude was one of a connoisseur of fine goods and a frank and honest love of culture.

“However, your Excellency Sugawara is quite cunning. You spoke of your

country's scenery when there was so much more for you to be proud of. Come, tell me, where is this land of Japan?"

Piña pressed her forehead and thought, *he walked right into it.*

And so, the other side opened up and lowered their guard.

"My country Japan is currently at war with the Empire. We are from the other side of the Gate."

When he heard this, Cicero's jaw dropped.

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For the most part, the pace of the subsequent negotiations was entirely dictated by Sugawara.

Cicero was a hardline supporter of the pro-war faction, and bringing him over required all his diplomatic skill. Also, the fact that Piña brought over an enemy ambassador might not have been treason, but it came quite close.

In addition, in order to recover from his shock, Cicero had threatened to send troops through the Gate to conquer Japan. The legions were currently being reconstituted, and that work would be completed in a few months. Their new

strength would be around 100'000 men, and in his panic he had accidentally revealed information that should have been kept secret.

However, this was because Cicero accepted the existence of a country of Japan. Because he accepted their existence, he could underestimate the actions of their civilians.

Sugawara had become an equal being, accepted by the other side, and a point of contact for further negotiations. This meant that in future, it would be fine if he came calling by himself. What was left was to inform the other party of the facts.

At this point, Sugawara withdrew a piece of paper, and that made Cicero — who was scolding Piña — quiet down. On that paper was written the name of... the son of Mrs. Cicero's little sister.

“I believe this is Lord Cicero’s nephew? He is currently a prisoner in our country.”

“What did you say, is he still alive?”

“He is, yes.”

Cicero’s wife, listening from the side, passed out from excessive joy. The maids hurriedly carried her away from the dining hall.

“In addition, in exchange for Princess Piña’s hard work in accepting the role of mediator, we will unconditionally return these people to you, in accordance with her Highness’ wishes.”

“Unconditionally?”

“Indeed, we will not impose any demands upon you.”

“How about ransom?

“Strictly speaking, her Highness’ cooperation is sufficient ransom. The safety of these prisoners is entirely within her hands...”

Cicero understood what those words implied; *Do not interfere with the Princess’ situation.*

*Piña was working as an intermediary because she feared for the lives of these prisoners. Cicero thought. She had no choice. Not protecting these people would be treason in its own right. She made this sacrifice to protect patrician sons and fathers, as well as my ego and reputation.*

These words meant, “Admit defeat”, or “If you want your prisoners back, make peace”. If Sugawara had flat-out demanded them of Cicero, he would

probably have rejected them right away, but since the other side was simply asking for Piña to serve as a mediator, he could not refuse. Regardless of opponent or circumstance, he could accept that negotiation itself was not a bad thing.

If he interfered with her actions as a mediator, the prisoners would probably not be coming back. In addition, while only a few people were coming back now, once Piña negotiated with Japan, they could probably bring more people home. Therefore, even a pro-war supporter like himself could not do anything to Piña. After all, whether his nephew came home or not was her decision.

To Cicero, he was the one who had to beg for Piña's favor. Therefore, he silently grasped Piña's hand. Piña's calm nod represented her acceptance of his request.

“Actually, there’s going to be a birthday party for Marquis Ducie’s daughter. You should have received an invitation too, right?”

“Forgive me, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know Marquis Ducie’s daughter...”

“Well, in truth, tragedy has befallen House Ducie. The Marquis has decided to throw a party for his daughter’s birthday to lift his spirits. I thought to bring him good news. Would you accompany me there?”

Any politician who could not read the meaning from these words was no politician at all.

In all likelihood, House Ducie had probably sent people through the Gate. Therefore, the good news of which she spoke must have meant that these people had survived. If he showed up there, Cicero's own nephew might have a better chance of coming home as well.

Cicero politely lowered his head and kissed the back of Piña's hand.

"Please, allow me to join you in sharing the good news."

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While Sugawara of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was making strides in the Imperial Capital, the temporary living area of the refugees at Arnus had changed greatly in these few short months.

This was because this place was where the Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada sent her knights and their followers (all of whom were female...) to study the Japanese language. This required the founding of a campus building.

Initially, after hearing Piña describe that dreamlike city of skyscrapers and "art", all of her knights were eager to go to Japan and study there.

However, since none of them could speak a lick of Japanese, there was no way they could go abroad and study there. Tokyo would not just accept them like that either. In addition, there were many other things to take care of. At the very least, they had to be able to carry on a conversation in Japanese, and so the Japanese government set up an educational institute at the refugee camp.

In this way, Japan had also bought themselves some breathing room.

The camp was also the home to the sage who was the official translator between the Special Region's language and Japanese, as well as the horde of children who were learning Japanese with her. For all they knew, this might well be a better place to learn Japanese than Tokyo.

In addition, there were Japanese people in the camp too. For example, Itami Youji, other JGSDF members and certain diplomatic officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were personally learning the Special Region's language in this place.

However, now that there were several times more people present, there was not enough room for all of them.

While they were trained in fieldcraft and living off the land, the members of the knight band were also patrician ladies. Being cooped up in the small prefab buildings would only give them stress. Their followers, who had to

take this stress head on, would become even more stressed in turn. Therefore, providing sufficient necessities became the most crucial task. In addition, they could not possibly allow diplomats of the Ministry of Foreign affairs to stay in temporary housing, and making the knights stay in tents was hardly acceptable. Therefore, they decided to abandon the idea of a temporary camp and construct more permanent structures instead of temporary ones.

Other than digging wells and building water storage tanks, the JSDF also had to dig proper drains and prepare water-purification facilities. To power all of these, they installed solar power panels. Through the steady accumulation of these improvements, life in the camp slowly started resembling that in Japan.

As an aside, the free provision of food and other living supplies was halted. Given that the refugees were making a comfortable living by harvesting wyvern scales, nobody objected to that.

However, it was inconvenient to have to go to a distant town to buy things. As a result, they set up a shop in the camp to sell various expendable items. Naturally, running this shop was left to the members of the Arnus Living Community (ALC).

After a while, the older refugee children could be seen running the shop. They soon called this shop the PX. It was much more convenient and closer to buy things from the PX compared to the extremely troublesome process of going in and out of Ginza.

The refugees did not mind the expansion of the PX.

The ALC did not need to expand. All they wanted was the things they needed.

The original idea was to use the sale of Wyvern scales to buy the food and clothing they needed, and to one day save enough money to return to Coda Village and rebuild. All that was left was protective equipment for work (gas masks, protective clothing and other expendables) which the JSDF would supply.

However, the PX attracted more and more guests. The highborn ladies of the knight band came by more and more often, and their maids would also buy things. They would snap up their daily necessities, such as clothes, tea and other luxuries in an instant.

The diplomats who came to learn the language would visit as well. In addition, the JSDF troopers from Arnus Hill came too. They did not just buy items from Tokyo, but vast quantities of local art products and souvenirs.

The PX had to accommodate more customers, and soon there was not enough space inside.

After the shop building was constructed, the number of things it could sell increased as well. But as sales increased, there were not enough people to

help with the importing, sale and exporting of products.

When they saw that the children and elderly had their hands full running the place, the maids brought by the patrician ladies volunteered to help (This was because after seeing the catalogue of items from beyond the Gate... especially ladies' underwear, they realized that the PX needed help so they could freely buy the things they wanted).

As a result, the young men of the JSDF were attracted by them, and the number of customers increased again, which led to a vicious (?) cycle where there was once again too few staff. The ladies who started out as volunteers ended up doing it full-time... after a few days, the need for professional staff became obvious.

In the Special Region, people were hired by connections. Since there were no job centers, there were also no recruitment services. Therefore, all they could do was put out word among the people that help was needed. After that, the middlemen would recommend people. It was very important that the middleman was a good one, otherwise one might end up getting weird people.

House Formal, which had close ties to the ALC, announced that they had several candidates for them. The ones they sent over were women from the Catpeople tribes. Since House Formal needed to deal with its financial situation, it was only natural that they sent their demihumans over to work. However, that only accelerated the vicious cycle further.

And then, another problem reared its ugly head.

Wyvern scales were very valuable and also very profitable, and as a result traders from all over were attracted by them. These traders visited Arnus one after the other, and what they saw were the valuable convenience goods from the other side of the Gate.

For instance, paper, pencils, clothes of stretchable fabric... the traders came in droves for these things. However, the people in the camp were not qualified traders. And so, more and more requests kept coming in (Thieves appeared as well), and the older children which made up the majority of the ALC found it hard to refuse these requests.

Lelei sighed as she filled out the Japanese order form Itami had given her. He would then send it on to wholesale companies or enterprises in Tokyo. After purchase was complete, they would import the good, and after the goods were imported they would be sold, and then the cycle would repeat endlessly. They might as well install a phone line or a fax machine at this rate, and some of the diplomats were requesting a fiber-optic line for Internet access, which was being considered.

By the time she realized it, the scale of the economic activities here had grown tremendously.

Where there were profits, there would be traders. However, the presence of

too many people was troubling. After all, there was no place for them to stay and no restaurants for them to eat. The traders who came had to camp in the dangerous territory outside the refugee camp. And of course, people with ill intentions had appeared with them. In order to take care of them, the security troopers were forced to work in shifts.

If they asked the traders not to come, the goods would stop coming as well. The people they needed here would also vanish, because merchant convoys needed guards. They certainly could not keep relying on the JSDF, and so they needed mercenaries. That being the case, those mercenaries would also need places to sleep, which meant more buildings.

Things being how they were, they could not shamelessly beg the JSDF to “please build more temporary shelters for us!” They would need to find carpenters and craftsmen to construct new buildings. Therefore, they had gathered Dwarven craftsmen and woodsmen, as well as the traders who worked with them, some mercenaries who looked a bit fierce... and of course, all these people needed places to eat and drink, and after they built a tavern, they had to hire a cook as well. When the cook produced excellent food and drink, it drew even more customers, and once the shops and tavern began operating at night, the JSDF troopers came as well. And of course, a place that sold alcohol would naturally need waitresses, so they asked House Formal to provide them with more recruits. The people who came over had bunny ears, fox ears, dog ears... they were monster girls.

In this way, people of many different tribes kept flowing into the Arnus

Refugee Camp. The ever-growing vitality of the place, combined with the influx of Japanese culture and the uncontrolled expansion of the place... before they knew it, the refugee camp became known as Arnus Town.

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Arnus Town had become lively, and then it became even livelier.

Who would have thought that just a few months ago, this place was a refugee camp hosting less than thirty people?

A wooden hammer striking a bell rang out noon, accompanied by the sound of disciples being scolded by their master.

The creaking of heavily laden traders' horsecarts coming to and fro, escorted by mercenaries whose equipment clanked as they moved, promising they would return... all these were now daily fare.

Nobody knew where it started, but travelling peddlers began setting up roadside stalls. They displayed tribal crafts and valuable gems and stones together, while the maids shouted to the uniformed JSDF personnel "Hey, want to take a look?"

When the sun set, the tavern came alive, a beacon of light in the darkness.

There were about twenty tables in the cafe, filled with stocky Dwarves, Harpies, Catgirls working in the PX, the maids working as waitresses and the JSDF troopers rubbing shoulders with them, holding mugs of frothy beer in one hand and heartily toasting each other.

There was a muscular old man with white hair inside the kitchen, who took orders with gusto.

Naturally, each table was getting noisier and noisier.

On several tables, there were people who looked like former soldiers. They removed the swords at their waists and sat on the chairs. One of the men sighed, and put his sword on the table.

“Oi, how was the interview?”

“Not bad. I got a job as a guard for the trade route going from Italica to the Empire,” said a man with a scar on his face as he leaned in to tell his counterpart, a man with a huge beard and holding a mug of beer, about the results of his interview.

In order to wet his throat, one needed to order “Oi, one ale!” Shortly after that, the bunny-eared big sister of the tavern replied, “We don’t have ale, do you want a beer?”

“What’s a beer?”

“It tastes great. You can only get it here. Just try it. In the worst case, just take it as though someone tricked you into drinking it.”

Since that much had been said, all he could do was order a mug. After a mouthful of cold, frothy beer, he spoke again.

“This is good!”

“There’s eight convoys running between here and Italica, you can join me if you want.”

“Well, if we end up together again, I’ll be in your care,” one of the men said as they shook hands. Then, he looked around and lowered his voice.

“What happened after that?”

“It took me a long time to get this job, don’t talk about it. I heard about what happened to the guys who attacked Italica, it scared the shit out of me.”

“Then, you’re seriously looking for a job? Hehe...”

“Turning over a new leaf and living your life correctly is the most important thing.”

“I see, I see.”

Halfway through their conversation, a loud voice boomed, “What’s this, big men like you whispering to each other! All right, you’ve waited long enough!”

The bunny-eared woman who carried herself like a big sister laid big plates of meat and vegetables before them and said, “All right, eat up!” The big-bearded man, filled with crude desire, reached out to squeeze the appealing buttocks before him and received a roundhouse kick that sent him flying out of the tavern.

After watching the man being bodily kicked out of the tavern, his comrade beside him laughed out loud. The bunny big sister clenched her fists.

Then, she shouted, “My ass isn’t that cheap!”

Just then, a voice said, “Yo, Delilah. How much to touch?” The speaker of this vile sexual harassment was Itami, accompanied by the black Goth priestess Rory Mercury, Staff Sergeant Kurokawa and Sergeant Major Kuwabara.

Delilah, who was originally puffed up with anger, flushed red. “B-Boss Itami, you’re so mean~” before covering her face with both hands and darting into the kitchen. The white-haired head cook shouted, “Boss, the VIP tables inside

is ready for you!” That was fortunate.

“Alright, this is good.”

It was called a tavern, but it seemed more like a roofed and walled canteen. Or rather, this should have been a canteen from the beginning, but because of the huge increase in customers, they had to start seating them outside.

Now, the so-called VIP tables were the places used by the original residents, the diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ladies of the knight band and the JSDF officers. They were basically a place for fine dining.

As a 1st Lieutenant, Itami was allowed to use these VIP seats, but he personally preferred the noisier, livelier seats outside.

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“Then, you were saying...?”

After Itami took a seat, Kurokawa sat down opposite him, while Rory sat beside Itami and Kuwabara took a place beside Kurokawa. They were here to discuss something concerning 3rd Recon or its members.

As usual, Rory ordered a round of fresh draft beer for everyone. In place of

Delilah, who was hiding inside the shop and wouldn't come out, a Foxgirl called Dora came to take their order.

After the beer came, Kurokawa took a swift mouthful before speaking in low tones.

“It’s about Tuka. How long are you going to leave her like that?”

The Elf in question, Tuka, was approaching from behind Kurokawa. She approached slowly, as though observing the inside of the tavern. She looked like she was looking for someone.

“Tuka! What are you doing?” Rory called out.

“Mm, mm. Just, something.”

“Are you looking for someone?”

“Hmmm?”

“Like say, a man?”

Tuka waved her hands and said, “No, no,” and left after smiling bitterly.

As Kurokawa watched her leave, she said, “That’s what I mean. She comes looking for someone who isn’t there around this time every day.”

Once again, she looked at Itami, wondering what he would do.

Beside her, Kuwabara watched the black Goth girl downing a bottle of beer, and he could not help but sigh. Kuwabara was a man of staunch morals, and the sight of someone who looked like a young girl heartily downing alcohol just felt wrong to him. However, when he tried to ask her about it, Rory called him a “brat” instead. After all, she was over 900 years old, and even if he was 50 himself, he was probably nothing more than a toddler in her eyes. Even so, he felt somewhat insulted by it, but when he realised she must have felt insulted by his words as well, it gave birth to a complicated feeling in his heart.

“But, is there a need to force her to face reality?” Rory seemed to be saying that while drunk, and obviously Kurokawa the counsellor would agree.

“Of course there is.”

“Isn’t she desperately trying to imagine her father is still alive because she can’t face that reality?”

“She’s running away from reality.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“What’s *not* wrong with that? People can face tomorrow because they can see reality and accept it. By denying reality, you cloud up the present, and tomorrow will never come. No, you can cloud it up, but your tomorrow will be that much crueler. Tuka’s father is dead. He... probably died in that village that got burned down. If she can’t accept that fact, she’ll lose herself in her fantasies and spend her days in the prison of the now.”

Rory rounded her shoulders and sighed as if she was exhausted. The mug in her hand was empty. Behind her, a child who was struggling with what she had just heard said, “That’s not all there is to life.”

Rory was thinking about the same thing Kurokawa was pondering. No, it would be more accurate to say she had always been thinking about it. However, it was merely “the truth”.

The truth could not save anyone.

Kurokawa was now walking her own path. After that, she would not notice if anyone said anything. She would have to wait until she realized it by herself. *Along with the painful memories... These are my personal experiences, but how should I explain them to her? What a pain...*

Itami spoke.

“Then, Kurokawa. Let’s say we corner Tuka and tell her ‘Your father is dead’, and we make her accept reality. How about that?”

“How about that? After the period of sadness called ‘mourning’ has passed, she’ll be able to accept her father’s death. Her lifespan will be far longer than ours. It might even be eternal, for all we know. An eternity spent in delusion about a dead person is just too sad.”

“That... well, that may be true.”

Rory meshed her fingers behind her head and looked to the stars in the sky. 961 years. It was long... or short, a little voice in her head said. In those 960 years, she had met and become close to people. Naturally, she bid them farewell. She had overcome these things by herself. So she could boldly say that trying to change someone else’s thinking was sheer arrogance. At the same time, because they were humans, they would not be able to realise that they were being arrogant. If they had not found the answer yet, they would probably never find it.

“Kurokawa, let’s go with what you said. Tuka can’t bear the pain, right? So now, while she’s lost in the gap between reality and fantasy, if we suddenly force her to accept reality, can you confidently say she won’t lose herself even deeper in the past to turn her eyes away from the truth?”

These words shocked Rory. She had not expected Itami to say something like

that at all.

The truth was like a shot of strong medicine. Anyone could keep quiet, and because it was so effective, they could be trusted. That was why people might be driven to their ends. Rory thought, *I can't imagine a man who was so detached from reality would know about these things*, and then she grinned. She has always been interested in Itami, and now her interest deepened.

“That, that is...”

“Are you absolutely sure it will be fine? How much do you know about Tuka, anyway? Do we, no, do you have the power to help her? None of us are psychologists or social workers. We can’t constantly keep coddling her. If we force her to accept reality today, what happens if we’re ordered to withdraw tomorrow?”

“...That is to say, we should leave her like this?”

“Ahhh, I’ll say something you won’t like to hear. If you don’t have the resolve to take responsibility for her until the very end, then don’t do anything unnecessary,” Itami said coldly to Kurokawa.

3rd Recon would be setting out for a mission tomorrow. They were to establish contact with the diplomat in the capital. Saying she had to prepare, Kurokawa left in a huff, an expression of anger on her face. Kuwabara left

shortly after, saying he had to escort her back to the barracks.

The only two left were Itami and Rory. They faced each other and drank.

“Well, go on and drink then, you big idiot.”

Rory offered her mug to him so he could have more. Itami grinned, and clinked mugs with her.

“Did you really have to say it that way? It felt pretty cruel. I don’t think Kurokawa can hate you any more than she does now.”

“My heart’s not so big that I can be that gentle to everyone. It can’t be helped.”

“Hmph~ you don’t have a lot of people in your heart, then.”

As she said this, Rory thought: *liar*.

Itami was faking his cruelty. If Kurokawa were allowed to do as she pleased, something terrible would have happened, and she would have concluded, “What a shame we couldn’t do it right.”

“It’s hard enough trying to care for one or two people.”

“Well, then decide on one, or think only of one.”

“What?”

“The girls will like you that way.”

“If I’m not nice, they won’t like me, right?”

“That’s wrong. To a girl, a man who’s nice to everyone... hm, I suppose that works as an example, to a man, it would be like a woman who opens her legs to anyone.”

“Hah?”

“People want companions so they can swiftly satisfy their need for love and affection. A woman wants a man who only shows his love to her.”

“Hm~ Is that so...? Rory, you’re pretty nice yourself, even though you worship Emroy, the god of death and judgement. I mean, you’re one of his Apostles, and you’re called ‘The Reaper’.”

“Ara~? That’s a misconception. To rule death is also to rule life. The goal of all life is death, and the way one dies is also the way one lives. Therefore, one

who welcomes death cannot help but respect life. The death that follows a person's life is the result of every day that he lived.”

“Is that so...”

“It is,” Rory smiled, and finished the beer in her mug.

“One more!”

“Oi oi, let’s stop here for tonight, if you get drunk I’ll leave you here...”

“Aw, come on, be nice to me~”

“If you’re going to be like that, let’s get you onto the bed first.”

“Meanie~”

Rory kicked Itami in the calf.

“Aiee, that hurt...”

As Itami rubbed his calf, Rory laughed like the ringing of a bell.

Then, a gravelly woman's voice cut in.

"What's going on here? Why's there a brat drinking here? Or could it be that this man intends to get a young girl drunk for some purpose? Could it be you have lewd intentions in mind?"

Suddenly, everyone on the scene fell silent, like they had been doused with cold water.

The chatter that filled the tavern vanished, and the only sound that remained was the crackling of the torches.

The crude mercenaries and the crude Dwarves' faces were bone white and they were silent. After glancing at the person who had just spoken the unspeakable, they glanced away.

It was a skinny man wearing a white headscarf... no, it was a woman.

She had coffee-brown skin, and long, tapered ears.

She was a woman who belonged to the race that was known in this world as Dark Elves.

## **Note**

Wagami is a fancy kind of Japanese paper.

## Chapter 2

“What’s going on here? Why’s there a brat drinking here? Or could it be that this man intends to get a young girl drunk for some purpose? Could it be you have lewd intentions in mind?”

Just hearing the woman speak filled her heart with anger.

She had been so happy spending time with Itami.

The mood was good, and so was the beer. She planned to continue teasing Itami, and then fake passing out in drunkenness and then hopefully he would carry her to the bed... no, he was practically about to do it...

*...and then, Itami cradled Rory like a fragile doll as he brought her to the bed.*

*He laid her body gently on the bed, and then placed a soft pillow under her head.*

*Because he was worried about knots in her long black hair, he combed it gently with his fingers, and in order not to get her priestess’ outfit wrinkled, he carefully tidied up her skirt and prepared to remove her boots.*

*He caressed her gently as he held her heel with his left hand and supported*

*her knee with his right, carefully bending her legs into a slight curve. Naturally, this would flip up her skirt, and the base of her legs, where they joined her hip, would become visible.*

*However, Itami did not notice. Or perhaps he had, but kept quiet.*

*Grasping the end of a bootlace in his left hand, he undid the knot with all the ceremony of unwrapping a present.*

*After loosening the bootlace, a small gap between her calf and the inside of the boot appeared, and Itami worked his fingers into it to pry it off.*

“...ah~n...”

*The feeling was close to a foot massage, and the moan she made was very suggestive.*

*And so, now that there was enough space between Rory’s skin and her boot, Itami grabbed the heel of the boot and said, “I’m taking it off, is that alright?”*

*Rory’s face was red, and her eyes were closed. Then, she nodded gently, almost imperceptibly.*

*However, that was enough for Itami. No, in truth, even if she had not responded, Itami would not have gone on waiting. Having filled himself with determination, Itami would not look back. With a bit more force than necessary, he pulled off the boot on her left leg. And just like that, her legs, once hidden by the jet-black boots, were now exposed in all their glory, covered in white lace-edged socks.*

*“Owie... please... don’t be so rough with me...” Rory pleaded in a soft voice. But the cruel Itami ignored Rory’s voice, and went to work on her right boot.*

*After finishing up, Itami prepared to leave the room after neatly arranging her boots by the bed.*

*However, her hand grabbed Itami’s sleeve and would not let go.*

*“What a hopeless fellow you are...”*

*As he thought of how to deal with Rory, Itami gently pried Rory’s fingers off and left. Or rather, he tried to leave. While he was trying, Rory reached out both her hands to grab Itami before dragging him onto the bed and mounting him.*

*After that, they would do all sorts of mufufu things until dawn... or at least, they should have.*

But now, that... all that... All that was ruined now. *How dare she call me, Rory Mercury, a brat!*

Rory clenched her trembling hand into a fist and looked at the owner of the voice.

At a glance, she seemed to be a Dark Elf female.

She looked to be roughly 300 years old, but on the surface she resembled a human in her late twenties.

She wore a kind of turban used by the southern tribes when they travelled, and a mantle of some sort.

The mantle superficially resembled a magician's robes, but it was simpler in design, so it looked like a piece of cloth worn on the body. In a way, it had been carefully made, but the way this woman wore a piece of tatty cloth on her body, with her curves visible through the rents in the fabric, made the people around her quite excited.

To begin with, she looked like the sort of woman any hot-blooded male would want. In addition, she wore the Dark Elves' unique "bondage armor".

"Bondage armor" was just the common name for it. Technically speaking, it would be a piece of protective gear. It was made of tough leather riveted to

metal components, and its defensive properties were quite good. It would not interfere with the body's movements in battle and barely impeded the wearer's dexterity, but the armor's design would lewdly display the wearer's body.

The legends of the Dark Elf tribes to the south told of their swift and nimble battle arts. That was why they favored this sort of defensive gear.

A woman like this now stood proudly before Rory and Itami.

Her right hand grasped her saber, and she looked like she was going to kill Itami right then and there.

“You, who are you? What are you doing here?”

Before Rory got angry — no, in truth she was already angry, but before she vented her wrath — she wanted to learn something about this woman. Given the way she looked, it could not be helped if people got the wrong idea of things, so she did not intend to do something unreasonable like beat her to paste or chop her into pieces. Still, she wanted to toy with this woman.

The Dark Elf female looked at the young girl, who was so frightened (apparently) that she was trembling all over. To calm her down, she decided to answer her question carefully.

“My name is Yao, a Dark Elf of the Ducy tribe that lives in the Schwarz forest. I am the daughter of Deban known as Yao Ha Ducy. I heard this was where I could meet the men in green. I have a request for them.”

When she heard this, Rory’s eyes seemed to shine.

Pretending to be a powerless little girl, she hid behind Yao the Dark Elf and begged her for help.

“Please, help me! I keep telling that man I can’t drink any more, I keep begging him to let me go but he keeps making me drink!”

The surroundings were already quiet, but now they were even quieter.

One could almost hear people gulping in the background.

Itami pointed a finger at himself in a “Eh~ is she talking about me?” way as he looked around searching for a helpful gaze. However, nobody came to his aid. Several of the guests started gathering up their food and swiftly exited the tavern, leaving Itami all by himself.

“So that was what he was up to.”

“This man gets women drunk so he can do whatever he wants with them! He said ‘Here’s a little drink’ but he wanted to get me so drunk I couldn’t resist

him! Then after I passed out he would do this and that and steal my purity and then discard me like a broken shoe~”



Rory pretended to cry as she covered her face and knelt down.

After seeing her like this, Yao tried to comfort her by saying, “Poor thing, you must have been so scared.” However, she was also trembling in anger at the vile villain standing before her.

Itami could see Rory sticking her tongue out between the hands covering her face. Her eyes said, “Sorry~” as she peeked at him.

There were certain women who liked to mess with the men close to her. For instance, while he drove a car, she would cover his eyes. When he scolded her, she would cry and say, ”Don’t be mad~” When she was like that, all the man could do was endure her antics. In most cases, these women did it to get their man’s attention.

“To think you would intoxicate a child to sate your impure bestial lust! I shall never forgive you!”

Yao closed the gap between herself and Itami, drawing her saber as she did.

She held it forward with her right hand, the torchlight shining on its razor-sharp edge.

“Fear not. I shall end his villainy and life,” Yao told Rory in a comforting tone.

Then, when she looked forward again, all she saw was an empty seat and an empty mug slowly spinning on the table.

“That... was fast.”

“The Boss is really good at running,” the head cook said.

“Bye bye Boss~ we’ll put the drinks on your tab~” Delilah smiled.

They were waving happily to Itami as he vanished into the night.

Because he had disappeared so quickly, everyone else froze for a second, and then resumed their normal activity like nothing had happened.

The head cook pinned Itami’s picture to a wall behind the counter, and wrote the day’s sum on the picture in pencil.

With nobody to point her saber at, the dark elf stood there in a daze. When she came to, she nodded to herself. “Hm. The villain has fled.”

As she returned her saber to its sheath, she wanted to say, “It’s all right” to

the little girl, but she was gone.

The girl who had been clutching herself in fear until just now had disappeared, as though she had never been there. Yao looked around, but she could not find the girl in the black Goth priestess' clothes. It was not that she wanted the girl to thank her, but she should have at least said something before she left.

“What a rude brat. From her age and clothing, could she be a shrine maiden of Emroy?”

“Oi, are you going to order something, or did you just come here to chase my customers away?”

After hearing Delilah's voice, Yao, who had been planning to eat in the first place, apologized and sat at the counter.

Yao turned to the head cook, who was holding a knife.

“So, what'll you have?”

“I haven't had dinner yet. Some meat and vegetables please. And something to drink.”

“Alcohol alright with you?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“Delilah, give that Dark Elf-nee-san a beer.”

“Kay~”

There was a Dwarf sitting beside her, and a glance at his red nose and face clearly indicated how much he had drunk. He asked Yao, “Yo, Dark Elf lady. You’re looking for the men in green, right? Why’s that?”

The Catgirl on the other side of Yao patted her shoulder and asked, “Why’d you come all the way to this place to look for the men in green ~nya?”

Yao personally did not mind drinking with others. This acceptance of company could be mistaken for kind-heartedness.

“Mm, I heard they were a group of good people, with no ulterior motives. Alright, please listen to me, then. I came looking for the men in green because I had a request for them. Everyone, do you know where I could find them?”

“A request?”

“Yes. No matter what, I absolutely have to get their help.”

So that was why Rory put on that farce.

Everyone realized why Rory the Reaper had chosen to take her revenge in that way. As one, they sighed as though to say, “You just drew your sword on one of them, too bad for you.”

Whether a mistake or not, hardly anyone would want to heed the request of someone who bared steel at them. If she wanted to achieve her goal, she would need to clear up the misunderstanding and apologize, before soothing the other party’s feelings. That was a difficult task to begin with, and now it was made even more difficult.

The Dwarf male turned away from Yao and said, “It might be impossible.”

The Catgirl looked away too. “Yes ~nya. I think it’ll be really hard ~nya.”

“Why is that? I heard the men in green were righteous people. They should not be the sort to abandon those in need. Why does everyone say that?”

Just then, Delilah put a mug of beer in front of Yao and said, “Here you go.” Yao looked at the frothy golden liquid and asked, “This is beer?” before taking a mouthful of it.

“Mmm, it’s good.”

And then the head cook placed a plate of food in front of Yao.

As Yao tucked into her dinner, she said, “Of course, I don’t intend to have them help for free. I can pay them with what the Chief gave me.”

Yao plonked a bag the size of a man’s head onto the table. As an aside, there was a talisman against thieves on the bag, empowered by the Lord of the Underworld, Hardy. If someone other than the rightful owner touched it, they would be cursed.

“A raw diamond.”

As they saw this, a disturbance started among the mercenaries. This was not just a mere sum of money; it was enough to buy a marquisate. And there was a talisman of Hardy, ruler of the Dark Elves, on it as well. Both the talisman and the gem were extremely valuable.

“And if that is not enough, I will offer my body as well. I have prepared myself for that. I have already bid farewell to my relatives.”

“Ohhhhhhh~!”

By now, the commotion had spread to some of the women as well.

Yao's body was bewitchingly beautiful. There was probably no man on earth who would not be excited if he heard that he could do anything he wanted to that body.

One of the mercenaries said, "Why not let me do it," while the others started to say, "No, let me, no, pick me".

Yao looked to a mature-looking woman and said, "Ah, what a pain", and then she smiled. Then she turned to the crowd.

"I'm sorry, but in all likelihood, none of you will be able to do it."

"Well, that's true. Anything worth staking this treasure and your body on can't be that simple."

"Ah, yes."

"Then, what is your request?"

Everyone's eyes were on Yao. She took a drink to wet her lips, and then spoke in a grave tone.

“I want to exterminate the wounded Flame Dragon.”

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The Flame Dragon had flown to the Schwarz Forest several months ago.

It happened suddenly. That said, despite it being the home of the Dark Elves, they had only taken a few casualties at first because most of them were outside of the village for religious reasons.

However, the Flame Dragon was not satisfied with so few deaths. It flew by again and again to fill its empty stomach, and many of their brethren had been lost one by one.

If this went on, the tribe would be destroyed.

The Dark Elves abandoned the Schwarz Forest, which was now the Flame Dragon’s hunting ground. They scattered to the nearby barrens, creeks and foothills.

Thus the Dark Elves’ daily life became one of evading the Flame Dragon’s attacks.

They watched the sky day and night, and even cowered from passing birds.

When the air raid horn sounded, all they could do was hide in their holes like moles and tremble in fear.

However, if they were careless, the Flame Dragon would get them.

It would breathe fire into their holes, dig them out, or just collapse the holes on top of them.

The same friends whom they had greeted in the morning would be torn apart, chewed up and swallowed by the Flame Dragon in the evening.

They had to cover their ears and ignore the pitiful cries of their comrades surrounding them and their wails as they awaited the end. They let their friends sacrifice themselves to buy time to escape, and moved to ever more treacherous places or deeper valleys to hide.

But a life spent fleeing was no life at all.

They had to hunt for their food, but the Elves' hunting grounds were also the Flame Dragon's.

When they spotted their prey, the Dragon had its eye on them. When they brought their quarry down, the Dragon might claim them instead. They tried various other means to feed themselves.

They peeled off tree bark and boiled it, then ate it as they drank muddy water. This was their life.

The resources they had brought from the stricken regions were running thin. Their food stocks were gradually running low. Resolving themselves to die, their young archers prepared themselves and headed to the hunting grounds.

There were casualties every day.

No day went by without the cries of orphaned children, or the sound of voices cursing the Flame Dragon for the loss of their children and relatives.

Of course, there were those who took up bow and sword in anger and challenged the Dragon.

However, they were like eggs thrown at a rock. All their valiant efforts accomplished was adding to the number of corpses in the Dragon's lair.

The aid of the spirits, their mithril arrowheads, their strong armor, none of them availed them against the Flame Dragon.

They thought that magic swords might help, but then they could not even get the tips through the scales. The magic swords merely added to the collection in the Flame Dragon's lair.

The Dark Elves' hearts were filled with despair and emptiness.

There were those who believed in Hardy and who felt the call of the afterlife, and went to it with desperate laughter, like prisoners just before execution. It spread like an incurable disease through the tribe. There were many who lost the will to live and lay down and died.

“This can’t go on,” someone had said.

“The Flame Dragon must have a weakness. The arrow sticking out of its eye is proof of that.”

There was an Elf who had taken his revenge on the Flame Dragon. The thought of that rekindled their courage.

“There must be some way to defeat the Flame Dragon. Look at its missing left arm.”

At the same time, the tales of the “Men in Green” reached them.

They used a magic staff called the “Rod of Steel” to destroy its left arm, and saved a human village from extinction. These tales were the last, best hope for the Dark Elves, who faced extinction themselves.

After that, the tribe decided as one to send an envoy.

The one who was sent out would have to bear a heavy burden.

The envoy would need to escape the Flame Dragon's claws, and find the men in green by hearsay alone. The envoy would need an iron will, a sense of duty, and a keen survival instinct.

The envoy would bear the hope of the village.

They would have to beg the men in green for their aid, by any means necessary. Failure meant the destruction of their tribe, their comrades, their relatives and friends.

Such a great responsibility could not be borne by any ordinary person. They would need great battle skills and knowledge, as well as the integrity to not give up the mission halfway and run off with the treasures entrusted to them.

They gathered the young people of the tribe, and began their selection.

In the end, two names were left. One of them was Yao Ha Ducy.

She was a skilled swordswoman and wise, and she was adept at summoning the spirits.

Her straightforward but earnest attitude was well known throughout the

village. They were certain she would not give up her mission halfway.

There were two candidates, both of whom were equal in ability, talent and personality. However, the female Yao would be more useful. That was because her bewitching beauty would be a powerful weapon in negotiations with the opposite sex. According to the rumors, the men in green were commanded by a male.

However, things were not that simple. The chief looked at Yao's face and sighed. Frankly speaking, her bad luck was a major point against her.

She fell into traps more often than others while hunting, and when trees were felled, they kept falling on top of her head.

It would rain when she went swimming, and when she went to town to buy things, the shops were invariably closed.

Her lover was NTRed away by a “good friend”, and when she was finally about to marry her childhood friend after overcoming various obstacles, he died of natural causes before their wedding day.

After that, during the mourning, a man who had confessed his love to Yao before she was married fell off a cliff while hunting and died. Thereafter, no man dared to go near her.

In addition, she had no luck at all during lucky draws, and the only time she won something was when she drew the top prize at a friend's wedding.

Honestly speaking, it was enough to erase all her merits as a woman. However, although her luck was bad, she kept pushing herself to keep carrying on with life in spite of her misfortune.

Everyone agreed on that. The elders could not disqualify her just based on her bad fortune.

At this point, the elders told Yao the reason why they had chosen her. After that, they asked if she was prepared to offer her body as a reward. In truth, those words were not necessary, and they might have been hoping she would refuse.

In truth Yao was thinking about whether or not to withdraw.

However, she had accepted. Since she had no luck with men, if the other party asked her to be a slave, a lover, a whore or a maid, she would agree. However, Yao would not sell herself cheaply. If the price of her body was the head of a Flame Dragon, she would proudly pay it.

Still uneasy about the whole matter, the elders chose Yao as their envoy.

Since this concerned the life and death of the entire tribe, a miserly payment

would be meaningless. Therefore, they entrusted her with the most valuable treasure of the tribe.

And so Yao began her journey, and after overcoming bad luck and difficulties, she finally stood before Arnus Hill.

\*\*\*

Yao's sleep was interrupted by a roaring noise.

She sprang up and looked around to see what was going on. She was in a beautiful forest whose canopy let the sunlight in through small gaps.

She had come all this way to Arnus Town, but then she was told that there were no more rooms in the inn. Since it was late at night, she could only leave her business until tomorrow, and so she had chosen to camp out in the forest at the foot of Arnus Hill.

Yao had a good night's rest. Perhaps it was thanks to the spirits nearby, who had granted her the blessings of wood, water, wind and tree.

A pair of swords was dancing in the sky above the forest, and thunder followed in their wake.

They slashed through the air and rose high on mighty wings. They were F-4 Phantoms.

These soon-to-be-retired aircraft were not subject to the same annoying restrictions as they would be in Japan. As they took off, the control tower told them, “Birds are all gone, fly as you please as long as you don’t crash,” which filled the pilots with glee as they were let off the leash.

They were veteran pilots, with thousands of flight hours. However, since they were over 40 years old, while they were taking the F-15 and F-2 conversion courses, they were transferred to a training unit because of their age and because it was their personal decision. They would spend the rest of their careers peacefully on the ground. There were no plans to reassemble the fighter planes which were disassembled and sent through the Gate.

All that they had left was the sky. There were no passenger planes they had to give way to and no American aircraft cluttering up their airspace. The sky belonged to them, and the freedom to roam it as they pleased was an opportunity any airman would drool over.

After takeoff, they folded up the landing gear and pushed their engines to full throttle, climbing up to 10'000 meters above ground level before performing an Immelmann.

The planes turned 180 degrees in mid-air, and with their heads facing the

earth, they half-rolled and dived before pulling up again, in a Split-S maneuver.

They had passed Mach 1 during their aerobatics, but there were no town councils here to complain about the noise from their supersonic flight. That said, they still had to be considerate of the Arnus Garrison and the members of Arnus Town, and how they would react to the constant thundercracks in mid-air caused by the breaking of the sound barrier. They were friends after all. They pushed their throttles to full once more and began a simulated dogfight. After peeling off horizontally, they levelled themselves out, and then they gripped the control stick with their knees and pulled back to bring their plane's noses up.

The G-forces from the sudden turn crushed down on their bodies, and even breathing was impossible. With a loud “hu”, they poured their strength into their waists and used every ounce of strength in the upper bodies to stabilize the aircraft.

In the instant the G-forces vanished, they gasped out the air in their lungs and took deep gulps of oxygen. They were competing to see who could hold their Gs longer.

The copilot said, “They’ve got a lock on us!”

“You bastards—!”

He immediately threw his plane into a Scissors maneuver. The plane jinked sharply, in order to shake the imaginary bandit locked onto them. Heaven and earth spun round and round the cockpit. Once they got the bandit off their tail, it was their turn to lock onto them.

While flying the Knife Edge, they went into a horizontal corkscrew roll... right now, they would even lock onto an F-22 to show everyone how it was done. Just by maneuvering alone, they were already of a world-class standard. In the past, they even managed to conduct a simulated shoot-down of an American F-15 while flying an old F-104.

They soared through the sky as though freed from their shackles, like innocent children at play.

\*\*\*

They were silver swords, slicing through the sky.

The silver swords seemed to be playing a game of tag in mid-air.

Yao watched the sky dumbly for a while, and soon discovered that they were man-made objects. Elves had exceptionally keen vision, and her field of vision could see the men seated in the giant blades soaring through the sky.

Then, she smiled, even as her tears fell.

“They were true, the stories were true...”

The Flame Dragon soared through the sky like it owned it, feeding on the helpless ground dwellers.

But now, the sky was no longer ruled by the Flame Dragon. The flying swords were faster and sharper, better than the Flame Dragon in every way. It was only natural that anyone who possessed these things would also possess the Rods of Steel which could chew off the Flame Dragon’s arm.

To be frank, Yao had doubted the truth of the tales she had heard. After all, stories tended to grow in response to people’s hopes. In order not to have her heart broken, she constantly thought about what she would do if they turned out to be false.

But now that she saw the flying swords dance through the sky, it told her that her journey had not been wasted, and it turned into proof for her hopes.

Yao had the feeling that her task would be over soon.

All she had to do was return to Arnus Town and meet the representative of the men in green.

Asking for help, no matter how difficult, could not possibly be harder than the road she had travelled until now. It seemed as though her comrades back home would be saved at last.

With those thoughts in mind, Yao gathered up her determination and set out toward Arnus Town once more.

As the thickets gave way to grass, her steps became lighter and faster. Soon they became a jog, as though she was unwilling to walk all the way then, and in the end she broke into a flat-out sprint that sliced through the wind.

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At Arnus, 3rd Recon, led by Itami, finished their equipment checks and convoyed up.

To one side, 1LT Yanagida was holding his clipboard as he did the final checks on the contents of the two-wheeled pushcarts.

“Silk, lacquerware, pottery, porcelain, pearls, whoa! They even have sake, and it’s high-class too, ‘Koshino Kanchubai’. Could I have a bottle?

“Give me a break, Yanagida-san. These are our ammunition.”

The man who replied to him was a diplomat in a suit, called Todo. He knew Yanagida was kidding, but his answer was sincere.

“Really? You mean you won’t drink it yourself?”

“You’ll have to trust us on that.”

With the contents on the inventory list, they could open a department store that sold famous goods from all over Japan. This seemed more like bribery than simple gift-giving.

Because many of the items were fragile, they had to be wrapped properly. Since there were many of them, they became extremely large pieces of luggage.

“After that, cases of gold coins, silver coins, and copper coins. We’ve checked inside them.”

They needed funds to do business in the Imperial Capital, and those funds were in those wooden boxes. The money was needed for activity expenses, setting up bases in the Capital, as well as recruiting and paying off informants. There were all sorts of other activities and fees to pay, so they often ran out of money during operations.

“Women, food and drinks. It’s similar to the way companies here welcome

guests. We'll find fallen nobles or people unhappy with the current regime and have them spread rumors to make the opposition's job more difficult."

Although he was still learning the language, one of the young diplomats had already performed several missions in the Special Region. He knocked on a case of gold coins as he spoke.

The Japanese government had obtained this currency by purchasing them from the ALC.

The ALC received Japanese yen in exchange for the currency, which they used to buy all sorts of Japanese goods.

"People in the governments of developing countries are very straightforward, they'll ask you for bribes up front. It's like when we were negotiating the Chunxiao business with the Chinese diplomats, they even threatened us with, "Oh, you won't mind if we send our ships over then". I was pretty envious of how they could do things. I wish I could say, "Do it if you dare. We'll see who's stronger."

"You mean you can't just tell them that? I mean, here."

"Well, that's just how diplomacy works. We're no longer in the colonial era. We need to maintain a presence in the Special Region and keep building close ties with the locals, to avoid leaving causes for conflict behind. Now, we're just going to focus on beefing up the pro-peace faction."

As he said this, a CH-47A Chinook landed behind him.

The downwash from the rotors stirred the sand and dust into a storm.

As it touched down, the amount of dust it threw up blinded everyone nearby.

The rear loading ramp lowered, and 3rd Recon boarded the Chinook together at Sergeant Major Kuwabara's order. Yanagida and the diplomats loaded the carts onto the Chinook.

They securely fastened the cargo inside the Chinook to make sure it would not move around in flight. After that, everyone sat on the seats lining the inside of the helicopter and fastened their seatbelts.

After ensuring that the diplomats were seated, Yanagida spoke to Itami.

“Then, I'll leave the rest to you. Make sure they reach their destination safely.”

Itami raised a thumb.

The rotors picked up speed, and the dust flew again.

Yanagida got off the craft and the rear door closed. Then the Chinook took off.

And so, they flew toward the capital.

Arnus was about 10 days away from the capital by horse. By Chinook it would only take about half a day. However, in order to avoid people's attention, they could not land too close to the city. In the end, they chose to land in the hills far away from the Capital, and walking from there to the Capital would take about one and a half days on foot.

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Before she entered Arnus town, Yao heard the noise and looked up to see a boat passing over her head. *Flying swords dancing in the sky, rods of steel, and now flying boats... with all these so close by, the men in green must be here,* Yao thought as she entered the town.

## **Note**

1: Koshi no Kanchubai (越の寒中梅) is a brand of Japanese sake. You can find out more here: <http://www.niigata-meijo.com/>

## **Chapter 3**



Yao's head hurt.

She approached everyone wearing green or dark green clothes and asked them, "Sorry, could I ask you a question?"

But none of them understood her

They were all the same. They simply smiled stiffly, or grinned, and their faces had confused expressions. She could not tell if they did or did not understand her.

Judging by the looks on their faces, they did not seem to understand her. She tried her best, but in the end, she still could not communicate with them.

As she was tormented by the thought that her efforts were in vain, she desperately hoped that there was someone who could speak her language. But she had no choice but to randomly approach people on the street.

After half a day, she had only managed to speak to around 20 to 30 people.

In the end, she realised that she could not communicate with the men in green... no. Though she could not get her meaning across, they could at least recognize individual phrases she said.

In the end, even people like these had started showing up.

"Dark Elf-neechan, are you looking for the men in green?"

She smoothly replied, "Is there a way to talk to them?" After all, the man speaking to her was not wearing green. By the looks of him, he was probably

a man who understood this country.

He seemed too skinny to be a mercenary. He was most likely a trader, or a hired hand.

The man said to Yao, “I know where the men in green are, let me take you there.”

Yao was immensely grateful to hear this, so she took his kind words at face value.

Then, the man took her away from the busy streets and into the dark depths of the forest.

“Where are we going?”

“This way. The men in green are here.”

Yao could feel the sweat on the hand holding hers, and she wondered, “What’s with this hand?”

*Could it be that he mistook me for a prostitute?* she thought. This is bad. As she was thinking about this, he took her to a secluded place and said “I have money, and I have connections. I can put in a good word for you with the men in green,” and then he tried to force himself on Yao.

“I will not be controlled by strength or money,” she said, and kneed him in the groin. In the depths of pain, the man realised he had made a mistake and ran off with a twisted face.

*Why had he dropped his money pouch,* she wondered, before resolving to return it.

Normal women would probably shout, “How dare you!” and continue chasing him, and they might end up beating the crap out of him. But Yao did not do that. He was a young man, and it was only understandable, so she decided to look at it from an enlightened point of view and let it go.

Yao was quite aware of the effect she had on men (especially in her bondage armor). If anything happened, she would take care of it by herself. After all, this was not the first time this sort of thing had taken place. She was worried that it might end up becoming a bad habit.

She was not the sort of woman who would be bought by money, alcohol or brute force. However, if someone approached her courteously, she would seriously consider it. However, she never met that sort of people, so she had no choice but to kick them in the crotch instead.

In the end, all she had done was waste time. She had been dragged around the town.

Even now, her fellows were still exposed to the threat of the Flame Dragon. Her sufferings were nothing in comparison to that. Yao motivated herself and went back into town to look for people.

However, she could hardly find any men in green in the back street.

What she found instead was a line of carts stuffed full of cargo, lined up in a

row. By the looks of things, the back street was a warehouse district of some kind. There were also warehouses under construction, and some of them had finished roofs, so the building materials were piled inside. They were then covered by a thick cloth to ward off rain and dust.

The workers here were moving cargo from the carts to the warehouse.

Most of the cargo was meat jerky and other staple foods. There were livestock in cages as well. After some work, they would probably be sold in the canteen.

There were mercenaries of all stripes having a rest by the side. They wore stained traveller's clothes, and looked like they had just come to town. Their horses were being watered and fed.

One of the mercenaries saw Yao, and he decided to be a busybody and come over.

“Yo~ neechan, what’s up? If you’re bored, why don’t you come play with us?”

At least this time he had asked nicely, and he seemed stronger than the rude fellow just now. However, he still lacked the proper attitude, and his tone dripped with lewdness. Yao fixed him with a cold glare and replied, “Hmph~ your little toy couldn’t begin to satisfy me.”

And so the man ran away, a hurt expression on his face.

It looked like Yao’s words had a crushing effect on that man. Perhaps he had

a size complex.

She sensed that she had done something bad, and hastily fled the scene.

After a while, she came to a place where crates and boxes were stacked high.

In front of her, Yao saw traders haggling over prices. There were boxes which contained a very fine and very shiny fabric. Even Yao could tell at a glance that they were expensive.

“What’s this?”

Out of curiosity, she asked what the fabric was. A nearby trader explained, “This cloth is called ‘satin’. Its key features are that it’s lustrous and feels smooth to the touch. It would make very pretty clothes.”

The trader had come to Arnus just for this.

“I’m not here to buy things.”

The man, who looked like a supervisor, broke off his haggling.

In order not to let too many people crowd Arnus Town, the ALC had set up branch stores in Italica, the Capital, Lognan and Deiabis, which focused on sales.

“Please, I need this, could you help me out?”

The trader had obviously been to all the branch stores, but all the places he visited were out of stock. He could not obtain the fabric he wanted. However,

he did not give up. He could not wait here for the goods to arrive. In order to get things done, he had to get the silk by any means necessary

The trader said: there had been a great upheaval among the patricians of the Empire.

The Imperial ladies now wore figure-hugging dresses in vibrant colors, and adorned themselves with sparkling accessories of dyed gold and silver threads.

The other women, their souls stolen by these fresh, new and brilliant items, nervously asked, “Where did these come from?” But their owners simply smiled enigmatically and kept silent.

“What’s that lovely little fan in your left hand?”

The answer: “Oh that? it’s nothing much. Ohohohohoho~” and then they would fold it up with a *patapata* sound.

“Then, those accessories on your person, what are those lovely pearls? They don’t look like normal pearls...”

The answer: “Oh, those? They’re not high-class or anything like that. Ohohohohoho~” and then they would move so their pearl necklace made a clacking sound, and show off their pearl earrings.

“How did your body (translation: breasts) become like that?”

“Ah, no, I have no idea how they grew so big. Ohohohohohohohohohoho~”

“Come on, tell me, where did you get those cosmetics from?!”

“From the same place we all do. If it looks pretty, then that’s because the person underneath was beautiful to begin with.

Women would not be jealous of others because of their intelligence or temperament, but in turn, they would be intensely jealous of wealth, beauty and other such things. They would use others' jealousy of them to feed their senses of superiority. Therefore, they would compare themselves with each other. One patrician lady was so jealous she bit her handkerchief to shreds.

And so, these noble women, driven by jealousy, envy and hatred, made their desire into a spearhead which pointed at the Imperial Capital's fashion industry, which were the textile shops and tailors.

However, the shops and tailors could only say, "We can't make anything that good. We can't even make threads out of gold. If we had the material, it might be possible... do you get it?" That was to say, without the necessary raw materials, they were helpless.

To them, what they meant by “anything good” was patrician ladies’ dresses, maid uniforms, or priests’ formal wear. The quality of all of these was in turn determined by the quality of the cloth, dyes, embroidery and stitching used to make them, and the difference between two good pieces could be very fine indeed. This meant that if the cloth they used was inferior, there was not much they could do.

And so, the textile tradesmen and seamstresses began running everywhere to gather information.

There was a tailor who made dresses out of unknown materials. They started there, looking at those tailors who went in and out of the noble homes, and when they found him, they squeezed a confession out of him (his daughter later said that originally he didn't want to talk, but he was forced to speak after he started fearing for his life).

After that, all the information they collected pointed to "Arnus."

And so, all the tailors and textile merchants thronged the ALC branch shops to secure printed cloth, nishijin embroidery, and other such items, which they sucked up like vacuum cleaners.

However, at the same time they also saw samples of other goods, made from materials such as lustrous satin, sheer and translucent chiffon, strong and tough taffeta, soft velvet, stretchable elastics and so on. The dying techniques they used were impressive, and the colors they produced were bright and vibrant. Even the incredibly expensive purple dye, reserved for the royal family, was sold like any other product.

By the way, the products sewn from stretchable materials were "T-shirts", which absorbed sweat well and were popular despite their high price. There were even signs that wearing them might become a trend.

"After we use this fabric as the base material, the rest will be up to the

design.”

The tailors, long past the horizon of despair, clenched their fists tightly. Somehow, somewhere in the inventories of the ALC branch shop in the Imperial Capital, they had found an “art book”, used for reference.

Although there was only one copy, placed all by itself to one side, it seemed to draw people in with its extraordinarily detailed art, which also had words written in some country’s letters on it.

Nobody could understand the text, but that was not a problem. To them, the important thing was the clothing designs that they used for reference. Some designs were too fancy, but that just meant they had to modify the design for their own use. When they thought, “This is pretty good...” they would take the feature they found and adjust it for use in other projects. In this way, the foreign art book became a top secret among the tailors of the Imperial Capital, and was carefully preserved.

By the way, if a Japanese person were to read the words on that book, they would find that the words said “cosplay” or “layer”. As for why such a book would be in the Special Region, probably only a certain Japanese man with a strong connection to the ALC would know.

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—Several weeks ago.

“Does anyone know where my magazine went? It was the international

cosplay special.”

“Beats me. Didn’t see it.”

“Where did you leave it?”

“El-tee, please take care of your own things.”

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And so, the Imperial Capital’s fashion trends were dominated by brilliantly-made dresses of dubious origins, or strangely designed new dresses made of mysterious yet marvellous materials.

The trader continued his explanation.

A certain patrician debutante-to-be was set to appear on the social scene soon. The merchant had been asked to “give me the best possible dress” for that event. If he failed to do so, her father would not be kind to him.

Therefore, for his wife and children’s sake, he had searched everywhere for the fabric, and finally he had encountered a material called “satin”. The trader said he wanted to use it for the dress.

“However...”

The man in charge held his hands in front of his chest and muttered to himself. Before he was responsible for the ALC’s textiles, he had also been a cloth merchant, and he was very familiar with the patricians’ high-handed ways. Therefore, he wanted to help the trader before his eyes. However, he

could not sell the fabric directly to him. That was the place of the branch shops.

As she saw the troubled pair, Yao said, “How about this...”

The trader had to return to the capital in any event, and the textile supervisor had to send his goods to the capital. That being the case, why not put down a deposit first, and then wait until the fabric arrived at the capital before collecting it from the branch store?

Once they settled the payment, even if the trader decided that he did not want the fabric, it would be fine. He would pay first and receive a receipt, and then exchange the receipt for the goods he wanted. The ALC would not lose out in any way. Still, it would be in the trader’s best interests to stick to the agreement to facilitate future transactions. However, if he could not wait for the goods to arrive, it might cause problems as well.

After the trader and the supervisor heard Yao’s thoughts, they pounded their fists into their palms.

“I see, that way it’ll all work out!”

“That’s quite a trick, to arrange things so nobody loses out. Then again, such wisdom is only to be expected of the Dark Elves.”

“Ah, that’s true, as expected of such a cunning race.”

The way the two of them looked at Yao seemed to say, “What a villain you are”.

Yao thought, *What, isn't this very normal?* and then she left, as though her job was done.

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She returned to the main road once again, going from store to store in search of the men in green.

Soon enough, she saw a Catgirl maid speaking with several men in green.

They seemed to be chatting. The girl smiled, and the men's faces turned red. As she encouraged them, they bought more and more things.

*Ah, could it be these men can speak the language?* As she thought about that, she realised that was not the case. Rather, the Catgirl maid was speaking the men in green's language.

Yao thought. Why could she speak to the men in green? She could not shy away from asking. When she chatted up the Catgirl, it turned out that she was the one drinking beside Yao.

The Catgirl mischievously asked, “Found your man in green ~nya?” and then she honestly answered Yao’s question.

“Because of this ~nya”

She withdrew a small but skilfully made book.

It contained the language that the men in green (according to the Catgirl, they

were Japanese) used. It was a phrasebook for simple conversation.

*Edited by the Arnus Living Community / Supervised by Kato El Ardestan / Printed by Gakuon Publishing.* Because of the color of its cover page, they all called it the “Little Red Book”.

“Could, could you sell this to me?”

The red book’s cover had the following words printed in gold lettering:

*The contents of this book are for internal use only. Do not use for non-educational purposes. After using, destroy by burning.*

“This book is issued free of charge to the ALC members or the people working for them. The language study people have them too ~nya. I don’t know how outside people can get it ~nya. I never thought of selling it, so I don’t know how much it costs. Sorry, but I can’t sell it to you ~nya.”

“Is there really no way? Like I said last night, I have to find the men in green and get them to help by any means necessary. Since this morning, I’ve found a few, but I couldn’t communicate with them at all. Please, I’m begging you...”

Since she had come this far, Yao was prepared to do it. She bowed deeply to the Catgirl.

If she could, the Catgirl would have liked to give the book to Yao. However, she was an employee, so she could not make that decision lightly.

Although it was given to them free of charge, books were very valuable things in this world. When she received this book, she was prepared to pay several months of salary for it. The things she needed for work like the maid uniform she was wearing now, the furniture in her home, her food bills, and the costs of other expendables were deducted from her monthly pay, which was a natural thing in this world. However, the book was a different matter.

She was issued essential items. She had a discount on food (employee price). The hostel had adequate facilities. Of course, if she damaged them by fooling around, she would have to pay for the damages, but wear and tear over the course of proper usage was a different matter.

These were working conditions she could not find elsewhere. One might even call them revolutionary. When she saw her employment contract, she nearly said, “What’s ‘paid vacation’, can you eat it ~nya?”

Because of that, they were very serious about that work and had a strong sense of duty, for fear of losing the trust of the ALC. Even in the face of temperamental mercenaries, they grinned and bore it.

If they were no longer trustworthy, they would be sent back. It would also mean they would be throwing mud in the face of House Formal, which had recommended them to such an ideal workplace, and their entire tribe would be shamed as a result.

She understood that Yao’s tribe of Dark Elves was in grave danger, but giving her that book would endanger the Catpeoples’ way of life. Their homes depended on the money they sent back to them.

Therefore, she could not say something like, “It’s just a book, take it.”

Normally, when she encountered a difficult situation like this, she could ask one of her superiors “What should I do ~nya?” In this case, her superiors were the elders who were the ALC’s managers, the sages, or the Elf.

However, as luck would have it, all of them were out. So she asked Yao to wait. However, Yao replied, “I can’t wait any longer. It has to be now.”

“It can’t be done ~nya!”

“I beg you, please...”

“Even if you lower your head to me, I can’t do it ~nya...”

“Then what do you want from me?”

Just as the Catgirl was agonizing about what to do, two people from the security details (military police) entered the store. They were dressed in the JGSDF fatigues, but they had armbands with “Military Police / MP” on their right shoulders.

As MPs, they would make regular patrols. Currently, they were on their beat.

“What’s wrong, Meiya-chan? Having problems?” the MP asked in a Kansai accent. Although the Catgirl’s Japanese was not very polished, she did not have trouble answering him.

If she told them she was troubled because of Yao’s request, the MPs, might

treat Yao as a suspicious person and throw her out of the store. But if she heard the reason why Yao came to Arnus and felt sympathy for her, they probably would not do that.

Just then, one of the MPs furrowed his brows after looking over Yao.

“Hm? This Elf. Isn’t she the one in the reports?”

“I think she is. Brown skin, silver hair, elf ears, very beautiful, wearing leather armor... if you gave her a whip she’d be perfect. Her turban and scarf are just like that scammer we were told about.”

“Then again, the one who told us this was a shady sort himself, but since we’ve met her, we might as well ask her directly.”

In truth, the MPs had received a report from a victim. “I was seduced by a beautiful female Dark Elf, she brought me to the forest and kicked me in the crotch and then stole my money pouch!”

According to the Special Region JSDF Expeditionary Forces Special Law, MPs were empowered to investigate crimes and arrest criminals within any territory in the Special Region administered by the JSDF, in order to maintain public safety.

The MPs told Yao, “Sorry, I have something to ask you”. Because it concerned the law and order of Arnus, they were trying their best to communicate in the language of the Special Region. It definitely was not because they wanted to chat up the Catgirl. Probably.

*A Japanese who could speak our language?!*

Yao was overjoyed. And he even said that he had something to ask her.

From the morning until now, she had approached countless people. Because she could not communicate with them, she was plunged into despair. But in the end, someone she could talk to appeared in front of her. Having some good luck at last filled her with happiness.

As she thought about it, her tears started brimming in her eyes. She even wanted to cry out in joy.

“Sorry, but could you come with us for a little while? We have some questions for you.”

*Yes, yes. As long as you'll listen to me, I'll go anywhere you want.*

And so, Yao complied with the MPs' request and followed them, as a suspected con artist.

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This place was in the middle of the forest.

There was a small spring between the forest's trees. A large boulder lay by its side, and an old man sat on that boulder.

He had his magic staff in hand, and he carefully watched the pupil he had raised.

His pupil was a girl young enough to be his granddaughter, and as an old sage and a magician, it was his job to observe how she had grown. He remained still, like a picture.

Lelei La Lelena stood calmly by the side of the small lake. She grasped her staff, and prepared to work magic.

The horn-like sounds from her throat were mixed with the sounds of a one-man chorus.

「Abru-main!」

First, she would need to create the framework for the “Initiation”.

The world ruled by the “true principle” would be expanded by the “magic principle”, and then one would create an “array” to accommodate the “false principle”.

The air was not moved by the wind. It was propelled by “false air” produced by the “false principle”. Under the influence of a magic-user, the roiling of the “magic principle” slightly ruffled her hair.

Her soul touched the “true principle” at the heart of all things.

A silence like that of a vacuum spread throughout the quiet forest.

A small ring of plasma appeared around her hand. This ring of light orbited her wrist like a bracelet.

The ring quietly split into two, then four, and the number steadily increased. Not just that, as the number of rings increased, so did their size, and they gradually spread forward.

The rings of light were like a string of pearls, and by the time they spread past her finger, there were over 30 of them. They grew larger and larger as they spread forward until the diameter of the foremost rings was now the same as her petite height.

「Duge-main」

Lelei withdrew her arm from the ring in the air and snapped her fingers. Then

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— The smallest ring of light exploded, followed by the next, in a chain reaction.

The explosions came in rapid succession. The chained blasts formed a column of violet light, like a gigantic trumpet of explosions.

The projectile of light it created was a block of condensed heat. When it touched the surface of the spring, it boiled off a large amount of water in an instant, creating a phenomenon that could be called a steam explosion.

And then, the water blasted into the sky fell like rain.

Bathed in the sudden downpour, Kato could not move for a moment. This was far beyond the results he had expected. It seemed to freeze his soul. Be it

the impact, the high temperature steam around them, or the icy cold rain that fell, all of them were bad for his heart.

Lelei maintained her blank expression as the rain fell, and waited for Kato's evaluation.

“Hmm~”

Kato swept back his damp hair, and squeezed the droplets out before speaking.

“Lelei, you've done a wonderful job. I have nothing to say. Can you explain the “principle” you just showed?”

Lelei bowed quietly and spoke in a scholarly tone of voice.

Mages of the Lindon school were feared for their combat magic, but in truth, the situation was not as it seemed.

For instance, the use of magic in battle was merely using magic to alter the “true principle” of natural phenomena, so they could be used for combat purposes.

“It's like this.”

Lelei picked up a pebble and let it float in mid-air, and flung it against a nearby trunk like a bullet.

The “false principle” interfered with the “true principle” which made the

pebble fall. However ballistae and catapults could also do this, and better, so she had to train to overcome the spell's weakness.

This time, Lelei lifted about 10 pebbles. The pebbles floated around the target and stuck it from all sides, leaving numerous holes in the trunk.

This was a technique ballistae and catapults could not duplicate. This was why combat magic was feared.

But practically speaking, what was the difference between looking at it from a mundane and from a magician's point of view? Fire magic basically drowned the target in fire. Using kindling or flaming oil would have the same effect. Similarly, water magic of all sorts eventually ended up soaking the enemy in water.

And all of these could be replicated by machines and tools. In addition, the radius of the "false principle was small, while the power it could produce was easily exceeded by large devices.

Although it would be fine in small battles, many battles recently were large-scale clashes of power, and thus the importance of mages went down. Of course, they were not completely useless. They were indispensable as doctors and for their utility magic. However, the Lindon school which prided itself on combat magic could not rest on their laurels like that. It was their duty to continue the research their forefathers passed down.

However, in the face of the "guns" and "cannons" and other potent weapons used by the JSDF, even the effort they had been putting in until now would

not be enough to keep up with the times.

It was a problem that could not be solved by using the “false principle” to interfere with the “true principle”. The practical applications of the “true principle” were more effective, and technological development meant that it would eventually catch up to and surpass magic.

This meant that the country on the other side of the Gate had a far deeper and broader understanding of the “true principle” than they did. If they used the “true principle to work magic”, could they produce a spell that exceeded all others in power? That was what Lelei was aiming for.

For example, the research into “flame” on the other side of the Gate.

According to that research, “flame” was a phenomenon created by the combination of “oxidizers” in the air with material “fuel”. They called this phenomenon “combustion”.

After that, “explosions” were an instantly-occurring form of “combustion”. It was similar to how a sealed object would burst after being heated, but different at the same time.

“Why don’t you try setting off an explosion?”

Lelei created a ball of light in mid-air.

On the other side of the Gate, the “oxidizer” was called “oxygen”. The “fuels” were objects made of “carbon” or “hydrogen”. Now she would use the “false principle” to generate and isolate a quantity of “oxidizer” and

“fuel”, and then combine them. After that, she would seal them in a field, and let it float in mid-air until it reached the right density. Then finally, she would release them from the “false principle” in one go.

She snapped her fingers, and the ball of light exploded.

“On the other side of the Gate, there is a substance called “gunpowder”. It is comparable to this ball of light.”

“Ah, that makes sense. You’ve created new applications of magic, Granted, these applications were influenced by research from the other world, but combining them with magic and obtaining results from it make you worthy of the title of ‘Sage’.”

By controlling the hitherto ungraspable phenomenon of explosions, the value of magic was increased as well. If one thought about it, this would have a lot of useful applications in military, industrial and other fields, Kato reasoned.

“However, this lacks power.”

Explosions by themselves were not very destructive. They released a huge burst of light, heat, and sound, and ended. To create a more powerful effect, one would need to gather more fuel, but that was hardly efficient, Lelei explained. At this point, Kato raised his hand to interrupt her.

Then, after telling her, “It seems we have guests,” he looked behind himself.

Lelei looked in the same direction he did. There stood a JSDF MP.

“I’m very sorry, but there are some difficult things we have to say. Could you help interpret for us?”

Lelei sighed softly, then bowed to Kato before following the MP.

## Chapter 4

The interior of the MP questioning room looked like it had come out of a detective movie.

It was roughly four tatamis in size. There was a table in the center like a decoration, with a chair in front and behind it.

The chair near the door was for the “questioner”, while the chair near the barred window was for the “subject”.

There was another table in the corner of the room near the exit. This was where the transcriber sat, and also where the internal phone was located.

Yao drooped her shoulders as she sat in the “subject” chair. She had managed to keep herself from crying so far, but it was quite traumatic to be suspected for a crime she had not committed.

The MP opposite Yao was paging through the Little Red Book and a heavily-used dictionary, trying his best to communicate with her. The wastepaper basket beside him was filled with balled-up pieces of paper. It would seem it had been a very trying experience.

Because the MPs were treating her as a suspect, they were supposed to speak sternly and apply intimidating levels of pressure as they questioned her. The

fact that the victim's purse was in her possession as well was a strike against her. In other words, she was caught red-handed with evidence for the crime she had been accused of.

Still, they did not go that far.

That was because the MP who was the investigating officer (IO) was aware that his linguistic skills were mediocre.

When one did not share a language with someone else, one had to be very careful when trying to communicate. He carefully wrote down every word she said, translated it and tried to string it together into sentences, and then he asked Yao if that was what she had said. After all this hard work, he could finally say, "Ahh, I get it, no wonder, it was like this all along."

What became clear was that this was not simply a matter of a simple purse snatching.

The MP went "Huh? This isn't what the victim said at all," and began thinking.

There was a brown-skinned Elven beauty in front of him. In addition, he found a word in the dictionary that could mean "was attacked" or "was beaten", so he could not just disregard that. If she had really been sexually assaulted, she would need therapy for it.

The MP's stern tone of voice eventually gave way to a gentle "Mhm," as he listened to her speak. Then he cursed his inability to properly interview her before turning to his subordinate.

"Well, that was embarrassing. I didn't know the details. Help me get Lelei-san for this."

The phone in the questioning room rang, and the MP said, "Please hold on," before picking up the handset.

"Oi, this is Kikuchi. Ah, yes, we've waited a long time. Bring her in."

Once Lelei came in and heard of their difficulty, she settled it in an instant. After listening to Yao's testimony, it was determined that the accusation of extortion was false. The man who made the false report confessed after being brought in, and he was arrested on charges of attempted rape.

The way crime was handled in the Special Region was that if the victim or the accused was Japanese, or if the crime took place in Arnus Town or the Arnus Garrison, the accused would be taken to Tokyo for trial. If the matter took place outside these places and if the accused and victim were both locals, they would be handed to a relevant judicial authority as designated by Piña, which would be House Formal in Italica. The accused would be judged under the Special Region's laws. In this case, since Yao and the man were

from the Special Region, he would be sent to Italica.

And so, the case Yao was wrapped up in came to an end. In order not to let this chance get away, Yao grabbed Lelei's hand as she was about to leave and told her all about her desire to meet the men in green, and asked her to translate. Then she told her about the Flame Dragon.

Even Lelei could not pretend she had seen and heard nothing after hearing about how the Dark Elf tribe had been attacked by the Flame Dragon. She was confident that the Flame Dragon she spoke of was the same one that had attacked Coda Village, and many of Yao's friends and family had lost their lives to the Flame Dragon.

"That is to say, you want me to ask the Japanese for aid on your behalf."

"Yes. From how I see it, you are a generous and compassionate person. Please help me."

Naturally, Lelei had no reason to refuse Yao.

Yao's dream was gradually coming true. But shortly after, she was plunged into the depths of despair once more.

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## *Arnus Town's canteen — VIP tables*

The air here was that of a freshly-cleaned cafe, while the stable-looking tables and chairs were lined up in a row, interspersed with decorative plants and pictures. They gave this place a high-class feel that was completely different from the chaotic atmosphere of the regular tables.

Although it was still too early for dinner, Bozes, Panache and the other noble daughters of the knight band had taken over the best places in the house.

After stacking several books on the table, they huddled up and whispered to each other. A careful listener might hear snippets of conversation like, “From Risa-sama,” “New edition”, “Dividing up translation duties” and so on.

“Ladies. We have new tea leaves today. Please, try them.”

The waiter serving them was called “Shopkeep”. He did not shrink from serving these elegant, noble ladies, but responded to them in a straightforward manner.

Apparently, he had been sent by Yanagida to train at a certain specialty restaurant in Ikebukuro.

Since normal people were prohibited from entering the Special Region, and they were selling tea and coffee from Japan at special prices to local chefs

and waitresses, as well as training them, the JSDF were unanimous in saying, “Shouldn’t this be handled by Section 2 (Intelligence)?”

As they watched the hardworking subordinate of Yanagida, the various JSDF officers commented, “Wasn’t he the one who went to Ikebukuro for training?”

That being said, he still looked like a proper butler.

“Ah, this is good! What is this dessert?”

“Yes, milady. This is a Napoleon cake (mille-feuille). It is made with thin layers of wheat biscuit to reduce sweetness, which are then covered in alternating layers of brandy-flavored custard cream, and finally iced with chocolate. This specialty dish was made by renowned pastry chefs from Kiyoyama.”

“Marvellous. To think, the country called Japan has made desserts like this into an art form.”

The noble ladies spoke their praise in Japanese. Since they had come here to learn Japanese, they should obviously be using Japanese while they were here.

“I am certain the chefs would be glad to receive the praise of such informed diners.”

He carefully remained silent about the fact that the cake had not been invented in Japan. As a waiter, he was a high-class servant to high class people... and it would probably be best not to confront them with evidence of their ignorance.

Besides, his eyes were working hard to gather information. However, after he saw the true identity of the books on the table, his heart filled with frustration.

“They’re fujoshi,” he muttered. That word clearly illustrated what he was thinking. Perhaps it was too early for them to be exposed to this sort of culture. He had wanted to get eyes-on the EEIs (Essential Elements of Information), or “What they cared about, and what actions they would take for those things.” But now, how was he going to fill out the report?

On the other side, Yao sat dumbly at another table.

She was staring into thin air, her eyes not focused on anything. She was like a switched-off robot, sitting quietly there.

Lelei took a seat opposite her. She watched Yao as she thought.

“Sorry for the delay.”

Delilah, the restaurant's poster girl, served them a pot of tea on a silver tray.

Lelei liked the herbal teas from Japan. This time, she had ordered St. John's Wort, which was effective for depression. Just to be clear, this tea was for Yao's benefit, not Lelei's.

However, Yao did not react to the tea at all. Since it could not be helped, Lelei poured Yao a cup of tea, and urged her to drink it.

"Have some."

"..."

Yao's facial expression did not change, but she mechanically brought the cup to her mouth.

After a while...

...the cup was empty at last.

Lelei filled the cup again, and urged Yao to drink it.

"Have some."

“...”

Yao maintained a stupefied expression as she once again mechanically brought the cup to her mouth.

After she finished her cup and put it back on the desk, she was finally composed enough to speak.

“It feels like a nightmare. There’s no hint of reality about it. It must be a dream.”

Lelei kept silent, and Yao lowered her eyes to look opposite. Once more, she brought the cup to her mouth.

After looking at Lelei’s emotionless face, the tears began to fall.

“.....You won’t say anything?”

“This is not a dream. What you heard and what you saw, all of that was reality.”

“It, it must be some mistake in translation, right?”

“The translation was correct.”

“Please. Say you got it wrong.”

“Even if I did, nothing would change.”

“But why? Why not?”

“Didn’t General Hazama explain his reasons already?”

“But... if it’s like that... then I...”

*“We hope you can help us defeat the Flame Dragon. Please help us.” That was what Yao had asked General Hazama after Lelei granted her wish to meet the Men in Green’s leader. In addition, she had showed him the raw diamond her tribe had given her.*

*However, Hazama was in a funk from the beginning. He opened the map, and after confirming the location of Yao’s home village in the Schwarz Forest, he shook his head and frowned like he had bitten into a bug.*

“It’s too far away. I’m sorry, but we can’t help you.”

*Hazama continued with his explanation.*

*“Your village is in the Schwarz Forest, which is within the borders of the neighboring Elbe Kingdom. I trust you know what it means for an army to cross a national border?”*

*It was an ancient and well-established fact that marching troops over a country’s borders was synonymous with declaring war. This was the same in the Special Region and on Earth. Even without crossing borders, just massing troops near a border would raise political tension.*

*“Then, then how about a small force? I, I’ve heard the men in green only needed about ten people to chase off the Flame Dragon. A small force like that shouldn’t count as an army, right?”*

*“I can’t do that. Sending a few men to fight a dangerous creature like a Flame Dragon would be tantamount to sending them to their deaths. I cannot give that order.”*

And then, Yao cried. It was all she could do. Yao had never cried like this before in her life. Even when she lost the man who would have been her husband, even when she learned her lover had died, she had rubbed her face, but the tears flowed in silence. They flowed now, down her palms and her arms to drip off her elbows.

“Kufu....”

She tried to silence her crying, but it leaked out anyway.

The officers at the surrounding tables had been keeping silent for some time now, because of the heavy atmosphere in the room.

Hearing the faint laughter of the girls attending the language classes only made them feel for Yao even more.

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“It was like she hadn’t slept all night,” Delilah said as she informed the cook about the situation at the VIP tables.

“Can you blame her? General Hazama rejected the Dark Elf-nee-san’s request to take out the Flame Dragon,” the cook said as he continued preparing food.

“Was it because she made Rory angry?”

“That shouldn’t be the case, right? Maybe it had something to do with Boss Itami.”

“Well, that’s true. Then it must be because of people on top, them. I wonder why they’d refuse? I mean, it’s rare that all their commanders would gather

up. Ah, I need to learn more Japanese..."

"Delilah, I don't care what you do on your own time. However, please focus on your job. I don't want to lose my job here. If anything happens, I'll give your name out straight away."

"Got it, got it. I won't mess it up."

After clasping her hands and lowering her head to the head cook, she poured hot coffee into cups.

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Colonels Kengun and Kamo, as well as Lieutenant Colonels Youga and Tsuge were seated at a table some distance away from Lelei and Yao. The four of them looked at the crying Yao.

"Youga, is there really nothing we can do?"

"You know we can't. Besides, the opposition is hounding Ichigaya (the Ministry of Defense), we can't have any snafus now."

Ltc. Tsuge, who had been listening for some time, decided to cut in: "So how does exterminating the Flame Dragon become ammunition for the

opposition's attacks?"

Youga replied, "The thing is, they'll immediately pounce on any losses incurred, avoidable or not. The commander on the scene will get it for sure, but the engagement is also going to be in the Empire's territory. Even if it's to exterminate a Flame Dragon, crossing a border will cause a lot of problems."

"What if we had a witness? Someone who invited us there?" Col. Kamo said as he shrugged.

"If we did that, it would be a perfect reason to call for a vote of no confidence on the Cabinet. Although we've secured a promise from the House of Representatives to ignore whatever antics the Senate pulls, the Cabinet still chose a weak doctrine."

Just then, Delilah brought the coffee over.

While she was serving the coffee, their conversation stopped. Once she left, Col. Kamo smiled.

"Still, do you think he can really get away with it? I was laughing my ass off when I saw it on TV. He got scolded for his joke of an answer, but it was just a formality. To think he was only cautioned to watch his words for bullshitting in front of the Diet... is that his character?"

“He was lucky because the three girls behind him had a bigger impact. It’s only because of what they said that it was all dismissed as ‘It’s just Itami’.”

“In truth, the strange thing was what they had done after they brought the refugees back. Of course, they couldn’t just abandon people in trouble, so a more bureaucratic answer might have been because they did not want the kids to be uneasy. Itami did nothing wrong by saying ‘It’s fine, leave it to me’. For all we know, that’s why those three girls were so supportive of us,” Tsuge said as he finished his coffee.

“It’s not just defeating the Flame Dragon. Our original objective was to defeat the Empire and demand reparations from them as the plaintiffs. Since when did they scale us back to just defending the area around the Gate and preventing invasions? What’s the government thinking?”

“That’s probably because they largely understand the political situation of this world. If we defeat the ruling power here, the Empire, this entire continent will probably regress into civil war. That’s probably why. After all, in the past the old Roman Empire destroyed Dacia (present day Romania) and ended up losing their defense line against the invasion of the eastern barbarian tribes.”

For instance, if the United States were to fall right now, China and Russia, now free of the US’ stabilizing influence, would probably go to war in

various locations. One could already see the spectre of those conflicts in Tibet, among the Uighurs, in Georgia (the country) and so on. Only a fool would think war would not happen.

Similarly, if the Empire were destroyed, the stronger nations of this world would immediately wage war against each other to seize power. Although Japan's JSDF was invincible in this world, their power still had limits. Therefore, in order to maintain peace in this world, they had to make sure no sides lost.

Kengun sighed heavily and then said, "Peace is important for trade and gathering resources. I prefer things this way."

Kamo put his hands on the table with an audible *thud*.

"In that case, why did we even come all the way to the Special Region? If we were just defending the Gate, we wouldn't need so much firepower."

"Right now, a lot of wheels are turning in the Empire. We want them to cede the area around the Gate to us, pay us reparations, as well as sign favorable trade agreements. So we will negotiate, and if the Empire doesn't accept, we attack. The plans are all drawn up, we should be able to take the Imperial Capital within 80 hours of the order being given."

"And when will that be?"

“I’m sure it won’t be tomorrow, but I’m fairly sure the talks will start within the next month or so.”

Kamo looked to the ceiling. “No matter what, that’s in the future.”

“In modern warfare, once you see your target, that means someone is going down. Once we start, we mustn’t stop. Drive straight to the end and finish it quickly. That’s the important thing,” Tsuge said as he ordered a coffee from Delilah after finishing his cup. “Well, they say waiting is part of business, but I’m pretty sick of it.”

“Like I said, it can’t be helped, right?”

“That’s why, we should send out a minimum of troops which won’t cause a ruckus if they cross the border. That should work, right?”

“A minimum? That Dragon’s been compared to a flying tank, you know.”

“That said, there’s only one of them.”

“That’s true, and we have JASDF assets too. Can’t we kill it with Phantoms?”

Kamo thrust his body forward, “We’re downing it?”

“Can we down it in the first place?”

“The Dragon has armor comparable to 3rd-generation MBTs (Main Battle Tanks). I don’t think 20mm cannon will cut it. How about air-to-air missiles, could they take down a tank?

“Hmm...”

“That is to say, we can’t bring it down without enough firepower. Hm, why not try a different tack? ...Dammit. ATMs (Anti Tank Missiles) can’t hit high-speed flying targets. AAMs (Anti Aircraft Missiles) which can hit them don’t have a big enough warhead to pierce 3rd generation tank armor. How the hell did 3rd Recon hit it with a LAM (110mm Anti-Tank Rocket Launcher)?

“Then, what should we do?”

“That’s why, if you want to bring that Dragon down, it’s got to be like this.”

Ltc. Youga opened up a JSDF notebook on the table and began sketching a battle plan.

First, they would engage the target in the air with Phantom fighters.

“Didn’t we already establish that they couldn’t bring it down?”

“They can’t kill it, but they can force it down. Which means we’ll be attacking from an angle of 20 or 25 degrees. That should be enough to drive it downwards.”

Once the Dragon descended near ground level, it would be the artillery’s turn to shine. They would rain 155mm and 203mm shells on the Dragon’s head, giving it no time to breathe or recover while assailing it with the shockwaves from sequential explosions. After all, they could draw a picture of Mt. Fuji in the sky with their shells; there was no reason they could not do this.

And then, when they knocked it to the ground, their Cobra attack helicopters would press the attack with TOW missiles. If possible, they would bring in Type 74 tanks firing APFSDS to finish it off. In the end, the infantry would move in to verify the kill.

“Well, we probably won’t have to worry that it’ll suddenly regenerate or power up, like in manga.”

“Okay, hang on a bit.”

Now that they were finished, Kengun began totalling up the battle strength needed.

“Since the Type 99 (155mm Self-Propelled Howitzer) fires six rounds per minute, we’ll need at least ten of them. Since the target is mobile, double that to 20. As for other assets, we’ll need at least a company. Four Type 74 tanks. Two JASDF Phantom fighters. Two Cobra helicopters. Spotter helicopters. Then there are the support vehicles too... damn, that’s a lot of assets.”

“That’s why I said it’s impossible...”

As they heard Ltc. Youga speak, the other three could only droop their shoulders.

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Yao was crying. However, she was fully aware that nobody would help her no matter how much she cried. She had already experienced what it was like to cry and not be comforted by anyone.

Therefore, she would stand up. She had to rise from where she had fallen and help herself up.

She had cried. She had hurt.

She wiped her tears clean with a handkerchief and wetted her lips with the cold tea. Then she stretched both her hands out. In this way, she would sort out the feelings in her heart.

Suddenly, she realised that Lelei the translator was gone. She had left a message with the Bunnygirl (Warrior Bunny) waitress: “I still have work to do. If you’re worried about not having a place to stay, you can sleep at the ALC.”

In truth, Yao did not mind camping out. However, she was worried that she might be attacked again.

She had received so much help from someone else, yet she had not even thanked her. Yao made a note to thank Lelei properly when she saw her again, and then verified the location of the ALC.

“In any case, I still need to figure out how to solve this problem.”

She had to find a way to save her friends and family.

For starters, she had already confirmed that the people called the men in green were a part of the army of the country called Japan. She also understood why they could not violate the borders of the Elbe Kingdom. She had learned that defeating Flame Dragons was not impossible, but attempting it with small groups of people was risky.

If their commander Hazama had just refused her out of selfish intentions, that would have made things simpler.

After all, people who sought money could be bribed with the diamond. People who sought fame could be tempted by the fact that they would be celebrated for defeating the Flame Dragon which even heroes could not beat. And if she encountered a lecherous man, she was confident that her body was superior to that of any human woman, and her 300 years of erotic techniques would leave them limp and pliable.

However, Hazama was not a person who could be seduced by these methods. He had not refused Yao's request for personal reasons. He was a man who calmly prioritized the future of his nation and the rules of the military. Trying to tempt him would be a waste of time.

Therefore, she would have to convince his subordinates. In an army of this size, there had to be someone who could be swayed by wealth or women, or both. With that in mind, Yao looked around her surroundings.

## **Note**

**APFSDS - Armor Piercing Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot;** a type of anti-armor warhead that is essentially a giant metal arrow.

**LAM - Light Anti-Armor Missile,** AKA the German Panzerfaust 3 manufactured under license by Japan.

**WARRIOR BUNNIES** - Vicious, cruel soldiers known for both decapitating their enemies with their teeth and also for causing Sir Robin to soil his armour.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCI18qAoKq4>

## **Chapter 5**



The hegemonic nation called the Empire did not have a name.

Names were tools used to differentiate oneself from others. An Emperor was one who ruled all the peoples, all the tribes, who held sway over all his allied kingdoms, a king of kings and lord of lords. He was matchless in his domain and military might. He was a singular, insuperable existence. By this line of arrogant thinking, the Empire would need no name.

The river that flowed from the glaciers to the sea was called the River Ro. It would take two days to travel on foot from the sea to the Imperial Capital.

Shipping vessels travelled back and forth along the River Ro.

The Imperial Palace was situated on the easternmost side of the five hills of the Imperial Capital, and the hill called Sadela had an expanse of flat ground on one of its slopes. There was a beautiful alabaster building on each of its sides, and all of them were surrounded by a broad stretch of forest. This beautiful green color was the dominant tone throughout the Palace.

The mansion on its southern ward belonged to Zorzar El Caesar, the oldest son of the Emperor, and Piña Co Lada's brother from another mother.

He was pressing a woman down onto a chiffon-veiled bed. He grabbed her neck from behind and pulled it up, enjoying the interplay of pain and pleasure on her face, his grunts and her moans mixing together as he lost himself in his bliss.

“My, my Prince, please, please forgive me...”

“Hmph, is that all the queen of the Warrior Bunnies can handle? Hm, I’m sure you can make better sounds than that. Moan for me.”

However, as he looked down on the Bunnygirl whose body was already twitching as she passed out, Zorzar slapped her buttocks with a “Hmph!” and dumped her onto the bed like a used toy.

The white-skinned woman rolled off the bed like a broken doll. The impact returned her to consciousness, and her body shuddered.

Her hair was as white as snow, and two fur-trimmed ears stuck out from the sides of her head. However, her body was covered in bruises, bite marks, and many other signs of violence.

“If you pass out from just that much, you won’t be able to satisfy me...”

“Please forgive me...” the woman moaned in a trembling, small voice. Her red eyes looked over to him as she climbed off the cold stone floor and back onto the bed.

“Try harder, then. Your people’s fate depends on it.”

“Please show mercy, my Prince, my people...”

“Enough! I’m going back!”

Zorzar did not even bother to answer her as he turned his muscled body away and ordered his attendants to dress him.

His Warrior Bunny lover sobbed as she rose naked from the bed and wrapped herself in its sheets. Then she limped away, supporting herself against the wall as she left the man's room.

Zorzel clicked his tongue. "I'm getting sick of this toy." He wondered whether to dispose of her.

A voice responded to his muttering.

"Your Highness, even if it's for fun, you shouldn't couple with a filthy beastwoman like that."

The speaker was Count Marx of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

"What do you mean, I'm an enlightened man. I treat all people the same regardless of species. That Warrior Bunny's body is among the best I've seen."

"But, if she gets pregnant..."

"That's fine too. She's the queen of the Warrior Bunnies. Having my child be their leader is a good thing too."

"But hasn't the kingdom she ruled long been destroyed?"

"Shh, quiet... Tyuule's ears are very big. She might overhear you."

Marx shook his head.

She had sacrificed herself to protect her country and people. She had endured

this terrible abuse for a full three years, but her home was long since destroyed and her people were nearly extinct. What few survivors remained were scattered throughout the land and lived in misery.

Worse, those survivors mistakenly believed that she had betrayed her people, and swore to exact revenge on her. That was cruel, even for a Beastman. The thought of what Zorzar would do when he became Emperor sent a shiver down his spine.

“Speaking of which, Count Marx. Why did you come here today? Peeping? Or do you want Tyuule despite your age? That’s fine too. She might be a bit dirty now, but she’s pretty when she’s cleaned up.”

After Zorzar was dressed, his attendants left the room. Now only Zorzar and Count Marx were left in the room.

“In truth, I have a matter to report.”

“What is it? Speak.”

“Recently, there have been some unsettling moves among the Senators.”

“And by unsettling you mean...?”

“Yes, my Prince. Meetings in the night, secret trade deals, that sort of thing. At first, there were only a few of them doing this, but their numbers have steadily increased.”

“Hmph. Is my brother up to something again? He must be stirring up the Senators. It seems Diabo has finally pulled out all the stops in his bid for the

throne.”

“No, that does not seem to be the case. The ones meeting with the Senators appear to be the people who have unlawfully laid claim to Arnus.”

“What, how could that possibly happen?” Zorzel said as he shook his head in disbelief.

“Could they be emissaries? After all, we’re at war, having envoys going back and forth is common. Usually the enemy negotiates with the Empire for peace or surrender. Could it be they can’t fight any more?”

“However, it seems many of the Senators have already been bought off.”

“What did you say?”

“Until now, everyone who has gone to war against them has died, but it seems quite a few people are still living as prisoners. This gathering of the Senators should be to negotiate the terms of their release.”

“How could this be?”

Zorzel punched his fist into his palm.

“To think, Imperial Senators would buckle under this sort of intimidation.”

“Using one’s kinship as a weapon seems like something the despicable enemy would do.”

“Well, it can’t be helped. After all, their own relatives are being held hostage.

That must have clouded their judgement. Very well, I know what to do. I shall inform the Senators of the enemy's despicable methods and wake them up."

"If your Highness goes in person, I'm sure they will."

"Still, Count Marx. Why did you not inform my father about this, but me?"

"There are many things to be considered, and if this news reaches the Emperor's ears, I fear something irreversible will happen. This cannot be a good thing for the Empire. Thus, I reported directly to yourself, as the heir to the throne."

"Well, that's true. We need to avoid conflict between the Senate and the Imperial family. Only Diabo will benefit from that. If that's the case, then we need to resolve it ourselves. Then, where are they meeting?"

Marx told him where they were meeting.

"What? So close to us?"

Zorzar furrowed his brows, and then said to the patrician youths outside.

"We're moving out!"

As Count Marx watched him leave, he muttered to himself, "You idiot. Go as grandly as you like."

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The name for this sort of thing would be a “garden party” or “garden festival”. The word conjured up impressions of large tents and roasting meat. It was located on the outskirts of the Empire, and many guests were invited to enjoy it together.

The garden was so vast that it contained parts of the forest that seemed to stretch to the horizon, as well as small hills, miniature forests, and even a little stream that led to a pool, in addition to enough grassland for a 36-hole golf course.

A large white canopy was spread over one corner of this garden. Below that, master chefs were barbecuing fish and beast meat over a large fire. They made heavy use of those spices that were rare in the Empire, and the smell alone was enough to make people drool.

Some of the young girls in maid outfits could not help themselves and tried some, for which they were scolded once the old maids found out.

A short distance away, a group of musicians were playing a piece. It was not enough for people to consider it noise, but their music livened up the scene.

The pies filled with soup gave off a delicious herbal scent. Beside them were heaps of fruits stacked up from various countries.

After the guests filled their bellies, they would move on to the desserts. These were frozen treats nobody had ever eaten before. The people here were happy enough just to have crushed ice drizzled with honey and fruit juice. However, the dish making its debut was called “ice cream”, which was made

with milk.

They tried the ice cream — which was packaged into small cups — out of curiosity, but then people started gathering because of the delicious taste.

“If you eat too much cold stuff, you’ll have a stomachache,” the patrician ladies chided their children from where they were sunbathing. However, it was not very convincing given they had cups of ice cream in their hands as well. Therefore, the kids just chorused “Kay~” before running off and pestering the maid in charge of ice cream for more.

The maid did not have enough ice cream for the children who wanted third and fourth helpings. In the end, the children began showing their bad attitudes and saying, “You’re so petty!”

However, when the maid calmly replied, “I’ll tell your mothers,” the kids dropped the act. Instead they pressed their hands together and begged, “Pleeeeease~”. Brats would be brats no matter where they were.

It was not just the food that was ready.

When evening came, an archery range had been set up.

A middle-aged patrician man pressed his belly against his daughter’s back as he taught her how to aim. However, this strange pose only served to make her miss completely, which in turn embarrassed him and drew laughter.

There were many others enjoying ball games and frisbee games. The kids ran around playing tag, and their mothers looked on as they enjoyed themselves.

Carp and goldfish swam in the small pool, while the ones who enjoyed fishing cast their lines. It was probably a form of entertainment to turn their catches into their meals.

As Piña watched this, she took a fruit out of a basket and chewed on it.

“Sugawara-dono, inviting the families as a whole like this was more fun than I thought it would be. I like this feeling as well. Perhaps future events for the knight band can be like this too...”

“Is that so? Thank you for your praise. However, having the head maid here helped a lot. I didn’t think of hiring musicians either.”

“No, that was House Formal’s idea. After all, the treaty stipulated full cooperation, so future events like this will not be a problem. Italica is doing well, and they say that the finances of House Formal are on the upturn. The House was quite clear about that being the result of trade with you.”

“However, it seems they’ve only sent over Human maids...”

In order to reach an agreement with House Formal, he had visited them in the past, and there he had met people of various races, like the Cat People and the Warrior Bunnies. They were signs that this world was a different one, but yet the head maid had only brought along human maids to the Capital. It seemed wrong, somehow.

“Well, the Capital...”

Piña's answer was not very clear, but she got the meaning across to Sugawara.

After attending parties hosted by various powerful patricians, and after visiting several patrician households, he realised that they only had Human maids. It would seem only House Formal was an exception. The other families accepted it, even as they disliked it, probably because the previous Count Formal was an open-minded man.

Piña and Sugawara headed for the garden, where everyone was, in order to see if anyone was feeling bored and if there were any problems to solve.

Sometimes, they greeted guests, or were greeted by guests in turn.

At times, he spotted an interesting character, and then he would ask "Who's that?" to learn about that person's name and family. That job required a good memory.

Piña's eye went to a Japanese man giving the master chefs tips on how to use spices.

"Sugawara-dono, who is that man?"

"Ahh, he's one of Itami's men, called Furuta. He used to be a chef at a first-rate restaurant before he enlisted."

"I see, is that why he makes such delicious food?"

One could not make such sublime flavors by randomly tossing in spices. *His*

*name is Fu-Ru-Ta*, Piña thought as she made a mental note of him.

“Your Highness, it’s been a while.”

“Ohh, Tuen-dono. Are you well?”

“Yes, my family is doing well too.”

The introductions that he had requested at the beginning were taking place.

“Sugawara-dono, this is the third son of House Mare. His elder brother’s name is on the list of prisoners to be sent back.”

And so, Piña introduced Sugawara to several members of the nobility.

All of the important guests here were already familiar with Sugawara, and some had even brought their relatives along, for instance, their wives and children. To them, Sugawara was not a messenger of a fearsome enemy nation, but a bringer of wondrous gifts from another land.

Halfway through the introductions, a daring young girl ran over and grabbed Sugawara’s arm, pressing her budding breasts into it in a teasing manner.

“Sugawara-sama, I saw my cousins’ beautiful jewelry and I’m jealous. Could you help me?”

This was quite rude, after all, and so she was promptly scolded by her parents.

The girl who clung to Sugawara was roughly 11 or 12, so she probably was not acting for greater benefits. It was kind of unsettling, but he did not shake her off. However, it would be difficult to be a diplomat without knowing how to handle situations like these. But there was a good way of dealing with young children.

As she watched the mother scolding her daughter, she whispered, “She’s from the Tueri family, and a relative of Marquis Caesar.”

Marquis Caesar was the leader of the Imperial Senate and by extension, all of Imperial politics. To the Japanese government, that meant that they needed channels to him at any cost. Naturally, Sugawara immediately responded appropriately.

First, he stood before the girl’s parents, who were angry about her rudeness, with a genial expression and asked them to kindly not scold her any more. Then, he remembered her name — Sherry — and promised to give her a pearl necklace. This way, they would form a bond, and in future he could ask them to introduce him to other people.

This was what the diplomats’ superior had meant when they said, “Gifts are our ammunition”. Personal benefits could not be allowed to conflict with the well-being of a country, and sometimes people were attacked by the mass media on it. However, for the sake of diplomatic efforts, they could not afford to be stingy. Being too miserly might lead to relations breaking down.

What happened was that Sugawara adorned Sherry with a necklace from a velvet box, and she promptly ran off like an innocent child to show it off to

her cousins.

Of course, after receiving a gift like this, one needed to repay it in a fitting way. That was the way they did things in the Empire. Soon enough, the repayment took place — they helped to connect him to Marquis Caesar.

As an aside, because of this arrangement, the almost 30 year-old Sugawara was beginning to warm up to the 11 year-old Sherry. Her calculative parents noticed this and began enthusiastically pushing them together, and the way things were developing began to worry him.

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Piña smiled bitterly to the panicking Sugawara and the overjoyed Sherry, and then let her eyes wander around her surroundings.

For now, it was impossible to fully monitor the activities of all the guests.

As a host, she could not simply play around. To be precise, as a host, one could not enjoy oneself at the expense of one's guests. Still, it was better this time round. She did not have to introduce ladies to gentlemen and vice versa.

Events like this created a chance for young men and women to mingle. Although it was only natural for young patricians to flirt with each other, doing so out of the blue was very rude. There needed to be proper introductions first, and much of the time, the host would arrange for those.

Piña was the leader of a knight order which contained many young men and women. If she had to arrange for all of them to meet each other, she would be

too busy to so much as take a drink.

And this party was attended by the relatives of many patrician families, as well as their children who had not made their social debut.

In front of her parents' eyes, they could not do anything overboard. And if they were to spend time on introductions, they would not have any time to enjoy themselves.

Because of that, most of the guests decided to enjoy themselves as families. They split into two groups of males and females and had fun by themselves.

The ladies had obtained beautiful clothes courtesy of someone related to Sugawara, and they competed to outdo each other with displays of their brilliantly colored dresses and jewellery.

Since the materials and fabric were equivalent, then the only way they could compete was through the design and stitching of their dresses, which sparked their respective jealousies and competitiveness. In addition, the minute differences in quality of the accessories and decorations on their clothes ate at their hearts, which was why they wanted to maintain good ties with Sugawara and his fellow diplomats, who had not yet entered the scene.

There were also some ladies clustered around Sergeants Kuribayashi and Kurokawa.

Kuribayashi was very obvious in her women's JGSDF uniform. However, similar to how Piña and her subordinate knights dressed, the guests could

quickly accept her status as a female soldier.

While she chatted with them, Kuribayashi chose Sergeant Tomita as a demonstrator to teach the ladies self-defense techniques.

“Grab his arm, bend it inward, just like this.”

As she explained, the tiny Kuribayashi brought the tall Tomita to the ground by way of a kokyu-nage. Her audience applauded her swift and crisp movements. In addition, some of them were charmed by Tomita, who looked strong and fierce, but remained calm and reserved.

(TL note: kokyu-nage is an aikido move, “breathing throw”.)

On another side, Kurokawa was displaying the ways that Japanese used makeup, and basking in the admiring gazes of the audience. As a nursing student, she had studied makeup therapy, and it was a happy coincidence that it could be put to use here.

Makeup therapy was used to help with the depression suffered by people suffering from chronic illnesses. Maintaining a happy mood had a positive effect on their treatment.

“If you apply too much eyeshadow, it’ll be too dark, therefore you need to apply it evenly. Also, you need to half-close your eyes to finish it smoothly. You also need to be careful with the lines of your eyebrows. A small change can produce a big effect.”

Kurokawa picked several ladies to demonstrate her skills on, and her hands

wrought a great change on them. Though they did not quite look ten years younger, it brought out the cuteness that they should have had at their age, or perhaps she just made them prettier, and the women gasped in awe.

“Itami truly has a host of talented people under his command!” Piña said in praise.

Sugawara agreed that he was a lucky man. 3rd Recon had only arrived a few days ago, and now that there were more recon teams who could effectively use the Special Region’s language, it was much more convenient for their activities. 1st Recon, which had been called back to Arnus, was not quite suited for this sort of work.

“The people from before were too rude, and lacking in humor.”

“As expected, it was because of their commander. No, if Itami-san were to become a regular soldier, we would be in trouble. He’s a very special case.”

“I understand.”

Although Piña did not know Japanese people like Sugawara did, she could understand his meaning after seeing his serious, dignified appearance. In contrast, Itami was a... lazy? Easygoing? Or maybe a liberated being? In the end, what saved them was his nature.

No matter the circumstances, a normal man would be filled with resentment after being beaten up by a group of people. However, Itami knew that Piña owed him a debt she could not possibly repay, but yet he had not taken

advantage of it. That was a very rare case.

It would be simple enough for Itami to get back at them; simply not allowing them to speak to Risa would be revenge enough.

To Piña, who thirsted for “art”, cutting her off from her supplies would break her spirit. In order to avoid this, she had to grow a culture of “artists” in the country, and the first step in that was the language classes. Right now, she had to stay on Itami’s good side no matter what.

Piña was prepared to do anything in order to accomplish that.

She had already picked out an appropriate girl from the knight band and sent her to Arnus for language classes. Although she was still dormant, on her command, she would take action.

Although it might be sad for the “lucky” girl, Piña had already thrown all restraint out of the window. She would use any means, no matter how subtle or high-handed.

After reaffirming her resolve, Piña nodded to herself, and then asked Sugawara, “Then, where is Itami-dono?” She had to make sure he was happy.

“He’s over there.”

Sugawara pointed to the main square, and specifically at an area that was walled off by sandbags and forbidden to the children.

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The guests there were their main objective... in other words, they were Senators, and the young men who would become new Senators. The JSDF had set up a shooting range here for them to experience the feeling of firing guns. In addition, they would also understand the terror of the guns that Japan possessed. That was the main objective of organizing this garden party.

In order to ensure bullets would not go astray, they set up targets in front of a big pile of sandbags. The targets in question were cheap pots of fired clay, bought in vast quantities.

Behind them were berms of dirt. This was what Itami and the others were setting up beforehand.

The Senators were lined up at the firing line, and under the supervision of 3rd Recon's troopers, they opened fire on the targets 50 meters away, to their hearts' content.

The twenty or so Senators took turns firing.

Cicero stood at one of the firing positions. He followed directions, and firmly held his rifle, took aim, and then pulled the trigger. The loud report of the firing and the kick in his shoulders made his eyes water.

Piña wanted to ask, "So how does a gun feel, Lord Cicero?" but she did not. If anyone had asked her that question, she would have thought they were trying to intimidate her. Therefore, she kept quiet. After all, they had experienced and had enough time to think about it.

The first shot made him jump.

The second shot awed him with its power.

The third shot let him feel that power with his body.

By the fourth shot, he wanted to own the gun he had in his hands.

And then, after ten rounds, he realized what it meant to fight an army that was fully outfitted with these weapons.

Next, they demonstrated the Minimi (a light machine gun). After they saw a line of pots shatter in an instant, they understood why the invading army they had sent beyond the Gate had been defeated. They also knew why the Coalition Army that attacked Arnus had been wiped out.

After that, there was a question.

“How do you make these things?”

Of course, they could not teach the Senators how to make them. Then again, even if they told them, they might not be able to understand it.

What the Senators could understand was that these weapons called guns were a collection of countless intricate parts. They were the product of a technology more advanced than the ones which had produced the gifts which Sugawara had given.

And after that, the question was, “How can we buy these?”

But they could not give them the answer they desired. They could not. How could anyone be so stupid as to sell weapons to their enemies in the middle of a war? The Senators knew that too.

In fact, if they had agreed to sell them, the Senators would have suspected some sort of scam or trick. Then why had they asked? It was because guns possessed a power which could not be ignored.

In order to prevent their theft, each gun was secured by two chains and each one had a person supervising them.

The kind instructors, who explained how to load, how to aim and how to pull the trigger, did not allow their vigilance to slacken in the slightest.

Then a voice from behind suggested, “How about buying them all off?”... But judging from the way they spoke and their actions, it would be impossible. In the end, they had to end it with, “...As if.”

Cicero returned his rifle to the soldier in front of him, and left the firing range after thanking his instructor for his time.

After that, they began demonstrating even more things that frightened the Senators.

“Ah~ we’re beginning the 81mm mortar demonstration, please come this way.”

Itami led the Senators to a new firing range.

Some distance away, there was a cylindrical object standing slanted on two legs. The cylinder looked like a tube made of metal. This tube pointed out to the grassland in the distance.

As the audience started to crowd in, Itami shouted, “It’s very dangerous, please stay back!” and the Senators had no choice but to stop.

With an order from a commander, the three-man mortar crew began their tasks.

One of them fitted the sighting unit and began aligning it with the horizon and a red and white aiming post.

Another person loaded the mortar round with its fuse and its propellant charge.

After that, the person standing behind him took the round in both hands, and slid half of it into the mortar barrel, but did not let go.

“Half-load complete!”

The commander folded his fingers as he counted down, “Five! Four! Three! Two!”

“Fire!” “One!” the two voices rang out together.

The man holding the mortar round let go, and immediately ducked his head down to avoid injury.

After that, the round slid down the barrel as it was pulled down by gravity.

The tail end of the round was loaded with a propellant charge. The distance it flew could be adjusted by changing the amount of propellant. Once the charge hit the firing pin at the barrel's base, it triggered a small explosion. The shockwave produced by the detonating propellant launched the round from the tube.

First, a tongue of flame spouted from the mortar's mouth, and then the round flew out. This was the strange thing; there was almost no gap between the round and the barrel, yet the flames and shock wave emerged first.

After seeing this, the audience was frightened by the bang which was far louder than those of the guns. And then...

“Impact~ now!”

After that, a huge plume of black smoke bloomed from the target, followed a second later by the gut-churning sound of an explosion. In order to amplify the visual effect, they had fitted the round with a long-delay fuse, so it would explode on the ground. This would create a spray of dust and sand like in the movies.

And then the mortar continued firing.

The rounds dug huge chunks out of the earth, and the sounds of the explosions roared like thunder. They fired over ten shots in the end.

The Senators who saw this also imagined their cavalry and heavy infantry being blown to smithereens. In addition, they also envisioned their fortresses and castra engulfed in these explosions.

“Sorry to trouble you, but... what is the maximum range of these weapons?”

Itami did some mental calculations and replied, “Hmm, from the measurements of this place, I’d say 3 leagues or so (1 league = 1.6km).” This was a conservative answer; there was no need to accurately describe their weapons to their enemies.

“Did you say three leagues?”

In the Special Region, even the battlefields were not that large.

“Ah, I have another question. How many of these weapons do you have?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t tell you the exact details. You can assume that every man has one.”

“E-everyone?!”

The Senators each reached the same conclusion. No, in truth, they had already known this. They just did not want to admit it to themselves.

*If we fight them, we will lose.*

They had experienced it firsthand. The Empire’s soldiers, the Empire’s weapons, the Empire’s tactics, none of them could hope to defeat Japan.

*Who was the idiot that suggested declaring war on a foe like this?* The Senators looked at each other with hateful eyes, but all they saw was the pained expressions on each others' faces. Everyone had the same thing on their minds.

After that, they saw Piña and Sugawara watching them.

The Senators understood.

They knew why Piña had so enthusiastically volunteered to be a mediator. Indeed, it was for the sake of the captives... but she knew, before all of them had discovered now, that if the Empire continued fighting, it would be defeated. No, not defeated. Destroyed.

They were surrounded by women and children who knew nothing of the terrifying enemy they faced. And there were many other patricians other than them. None of them were on their guard. They lived in leisure. Before this day, Piña thought she might have been one of them.

After exchanging looks, Marquis Ducie and Lord Cicero stepped out of the group.

Cicero forced out his question.

“Sugawara-dono. May I ask why Japan wants peace? It's clear that as long as they fight, they will be victorious.”

“Peace is exactly what my country wants.”

Marquis Ducie replied in a voice that matched his distinguished station.

“Peace... I see. What a pleasant-sounding word. But this word has many meanings. The peace attained through victory is sweet, but the peace of being defeated and cast aside is bitter. Both are peace all the same, but this old one is aware that they have completely different meanings. Until this day, this old one has only tasted the peace of victory.”

“But your Excellency, there is still some time before the armies of Japan come for us.”

After hearing Cicero’s words, the Marquis nodded.

“You are correct. Peace talks are essential. However, we must verify the conditions of the peace treaty with Japan.”

Sugawara nodded, and then he coldly stated the basic stipulations:

***One: The Empire must admit its guilt in starting the war and hand over the persons responsible for punishment.***

***Two: The Empire must pay the appropriate damages to Japan. This amount is 500 million suwanis.***

***Three: The Empire must cede the territory around the Gate for 100 leagues around the Gate to Japan. A demilitarized zone will exist for 10 leagues around this border where both sides are not permitted to station military forces.***

#### ***Four: The Empire must sign trade agreements with Japan.***

“Five... five hundred million suwanis?!”

“There wouldn’t be that much money in the world even if you gathered it all together!”

“Asking to punish the responsible parties, on top of ceding territory, this is asking too much!”

“Exactly. Do you intend to destroy the Empire?”

After seeing the panicking Senators, Sugawara hurriedly clarified the conditions.

“There’s no need to pay it all at once. Also, the sum can also be paid with mineral rights.”

“Even... even so... Don’t you think it’s a bit much?”

“It’s, it’s impossible. We won’t be able to convince the other Senators of this.”

“How can you say you desire peace when you say this?”

Piña was also trembling when she heard the conditions of the Japanese government.

To think, the peace proceedings she was presiding over would turn out to be a

death sentence. Sugawara's words about paying in instalments and paying in mineral rights went in one ear and out the others.

Sugawara, who had been a pleasant diplomat who was building ties with Japan, was suddenly turning into a gigantic monster before Piña's eyes. The strength fled her body, and in the end, she could not even remain standing and sat down. In a voice filled with despair, Piña asked:

"Sugawara-dono. May, may I ask how this is different from an unconditional surrender? Rather than this... wouldn't it be better to just kill us all and save the time?"

"Indeed, 500 million suwanis was probably too much of a shock," Sugawara said after a brief pause to think.

"That amount is basically one year's worth of our budget, and a little bit extra."

The Senators sat down one by one.

All the gold objects on the continent... starting from the crowns of their vassal kings, their treasure, their currency... if you gathered them all up and reforged them into suwani, they could not mint anywhere near 500 million of them. And to think, this huge sum was roughly equivalent to a year's expenses for the enemy. How big was this country called Japan?

Regarding the problem of payment, the Japanese government had already verified the Special Region's economic situation and identified potential

problems before drawing up the agreement.

For example, the sum total of all the gold ever mined throughout the whole of human existence was around 160'000 tons. Granted, this was due to advances in mining methods over the recent two or three centuries.

Judging by the technological level of the Special Region, they probably still extracted gold by hand, using pickaxes and shovels. Even with the help of ogres and goblins, given their undeveloped methods, the total amount of gold extracted would be around 10'000 tons.

In addition, even the Empire could not completely administer the whole of the Special Region.

And within all this, the suwani was this world's most valuable currency.

A suwani contained roughly 60 grams of gold and was roughly the size of a Japanese 500 yen coin. It was very thick and heavy. Besides using it in circulation, it was also used as a form of investment, similar to the gold koban coins of Edo-period Japan. As a result, very few were made and almost none of them appeared on the market.

One thousand of these gold pieces would weigh 60 kilos. One million (one thousand thousand) of them would weigh 60 tons. 500 million of them would require 30'000 tons of gold... that was to say, it was impossible to pay.

Then there was the most commonly circulated gold coin in the Empire, the sink. It was slightly smaller than the suwani, and its gold content was slightly

under ten grams. As a trade currency of the Special Region, its value was commonly subject to fluctuations depending on local conditions. Therefore they could not simply equate 6 sinks = 1 suwani by gold content alone.

Sinks were quite valuable because of their convenience in trade. Therefore, the exchange rate was 5 sinks to 1 suwani.

If the Empire bought back large amounts of currency to pay off the debt, it would cause hyperinflation and make buying things difficult. This would also affect other currencies.

The average citizen used silver denarii, and a soldier's daily pay was in soltas (a day's pay for a soldier was one solta). If gold currency was gone, then the importance of silver and copper currency would increase as well. This would lead to explosive inflation and eventually a large-scale halt in trade.

If they did pay this huge sum, it would not just be the Empire whose economy was destroyed, but the entire Special Region's. In addition, if they tried to bring so much money back through the Gate, the Americans, Russians, Chinese, French, Italians and other nuclear powers would most likely order a nuclear strike on Japan as well. With the gold market in freefall, the entire world's economy would collapse as well.

Therefore, actually paying 500 million suwanis was out of the question. If they actually paid it, it would cause a lot of headaches. Circulating inferior currencies with lower gold content would also be very troublesome. These poor currencies would cause a market crash if they were used in the Empire.

That being said, they could not actually tell them that the amount was “being decided”.

On Japan’s side, they were simply following the example of their neighbors after battle. They had asked for 1.4 times their yearly national budget, so Japan had instead asked for their yearly budget instead.

These funds would be used for compensation paid out to the victims, various other forms of compensation such as for loss of income caused by the Ginza Incident, in addition to the cost of the JSDF’s ammunition, manpower, fuel, and so on.

Sugawara tried his best to explain these details to the Senators (of course, some things could not be said), and in spite of his clumsy command of the language, he finally managed to make the Senators understand.

The important thing was that the reparations they demanded could be met in ways other than by currency.

They would decide on the punishment of the responsible parties later. Similarly, the details of the trade agreements.

In other words, what Japan wanted was...

They wanted the Empire to apologize and say, “We were wrong, and we’re sorry.”

And then, they wanted someone to be punished.

The Empire had to pay reparations, as much as they could.

Because they could not possibly clear the entire debt in one shot, they would need to pay in instalments, and they could pay with valuable goods, or with the rights to underground minerals.

Everything around the Gate belonged to Japan, and the Imperial Army could not approach it.

And then, trade. Or rather, they could make more money with trade.

...Those were the details.

These terms were quite reasonable to the loser. In addition, they would not need to become a vassal country and pay tribute in perpetuity.

In the worst case scenario, after being defeated, the whole country would be conquered. Its rulers and nobles would be executed or exiled, and after its land was taken the people would become slaves and there was a chance there would be rampant looting in the cities and streets.

Therefore, this request for mere currency was incredibly lenient, in a sense.

The Senators who understood this point sighed in relief. Their shoulders were heaving, as though they had just finished a sprint.

“Let, let’s discuss this properly...”

“Y-yes, that’s it. Let’s sit down and talk about it. Especially the reparations.

If we learn about each other's situations, we can find a solution that's satisfactory to both our sides.”

Although it was not exactly what Sugawara was aiming for, it would seem the preparations for talks would go swimmingly. The dates, the participants... all these were settled in a flash.

At this point, Piña collapsed.

Perhaps she had fallen from shock, because she would twitch from time to time. Itami picked up a branch and poked her, and then Piña’s entire body seized up.

“Ah, Piña-dono. Are you alright?”

Next, he patted Piña’s face. Then, Piña suddenly threw open her eyes and grabbed Itami’s hand.

“Itami-dono... I... I don’t think I can make it any more. So I must tell you right now. I’m very sorry about what happened back then. Please, please, I pray you will forgive me!”

*Back then? ...Ah, what happened back then. When Bozes and the others beat the crap out of me... As Itami recalled that incident, he gently lifted up Piña’s upper body.*

“Oh, it’s fine. Humans don’t die so easily.”

“No, I can’t... I’m not going to make it... please. Please forgive me,

please..."

"I got it, I forgive you, I forgive you, so get a hold of — Waah!"

Piña was hugging Itami tightly.

And then, she muttered "Really? You forgive me... thank you, thank you so much..." before bursting into tears.

## Chapter 6

And so, the Japanese diplomats and the Imperial Senate could finally begin the preparations for the peace talks. Piña breathed a huge sigh of relief, having crossed a difficult hurdle. After all, she was only a mediator, and what happened next would be up to the Japanese and the Senators.

Piña's job was to guarantee freedom of movement to the Japanese or to facilitate that movement. It was not very important, which meant that it was a job with little responsibility. Now she could start clearing up the leftover work that the official she sent to House Formal had been bugging her about, as well as managing the knight order. She could also spend time reading her beloved "art".

Of course, as a member of the Imperial family, she was concerned about the progress of the negotiations. However, the real problem was the veteran Senators. She knew the facts and that she had no role in what was to come, but it should be fine to hope for something.

In addition, Bozes' mistake was wiped away by the guarantee of mercy from Itami, along with her guilt, her unease and the mixed feelings of fear and regret in her heart. Because of that, she felt like the storm had passed and the sun had finally come out for her.

Piña wiped her tear-stained cheeks with the back of a hand, and smiled, brighter and more happily than before. Not long ago, she had been in the depths of despair, but now her spirits were rapidly rising, like a Patriot missile. Itami was not good at dealing with women, and seeing Piña's unguarded, genuine smile made him nervous.

What made it worse was the feeling of her twin peaks pressed tightly against him, as well as her softness, her warmth, her floral fragrance, all of which titillated his senses. As his affection gauge rose, not just by 1 point, but all the way up to 8 (10 points would be the maximum), Itami blushed bright red, like a shy schoolboy.

“Ah, that, this, your Highness. We shouldn’t go on with this, a lot of people are watching.”

After the matter, once people started saying, “So you like it like that,” or “Having fun, were we?” even if he tried to protest, it would just look like he was making excuses. That was to say, in order not to be teased, he had to get back to work.

And of course, Piña as she was now said, “And what about that?” She was so high on joy that she scarcely knew what she was saying. Even if she knew, she probably would not care. After all, her delight sprang from the bottom of her heart.

*Forget it, this is just part of the job,* Itami thought. But once he thought about how he would be scolded when he went back, he fell into a funk. Those were his true feelings. Just then, his earpiece rang.

“*Avenger, this is Archer. Please respond.*”

His wildly beating heart immediately returned to normal and his blood and brain that felt like liquid fire promptly cooled down. He pressed his comm

button and replied.

“This is Avenger. What’s wrong?”

*“Sorry to interrupt your fun. A bunch of riders who don’t seem like guests have just passed the SSL (surveillance security line) and they’re headed your way.”*

“One moment.”

After Itami finished, he turned back to Piña in his arms.

“Your Highness, I’ve received a report that a group of horsemen are closing in. Do you know anything about it?”

“Ah ~ I haven’t. Is something wrong?”

An old Oriental medical text once wrote that an excess of certain emotions would have negative effects on a body. For anger, the blood would rise to the head and expand the blood vessels, while for fear, the blood would rush to one’s lower body, causing the muscles to relax and leading to incontinence, and a loss of strength in the diaphragm. Similarly, excessive joy would cause a profound relaxation throughout the body. Because of her joy, Piña was now excessively relaxed in a mental sense, so her reflexes were dulled and she was useless to him.

There were also some people who thought better under stress. Piña was probably this sort of person. Since he could not get any information from her, he had to imagine that they were rogues or gangsters, or that they were

elements of the Empire's military, and think of countermeasures.

If he wanted the “S” (Special Forces Group) contingent watching over them to take care of it, he would have to hurry, but it would be unwise to take action without knowing who the enemy was. If he ordered them to go to work, it meant that every single one of them would be buried in darkness. He had to consider if his actions would make trouble for Piña.

If they were thieves or bandits, then they would have to be eliminated. The problem was if they were members of the government or the military. In that case, they could not be taken out unless there was grave danger. However, if they saw the JSDF here, it would be very bad, so he would have to think of a way to hide everyone.

Because Itami’s basic principle was “escape”, he was not particularly troubled by that conclusion.

“Tomita! Kurata! Katsumoto! Get the Senators out of here on the HMV. Sugawara-san, there’s a group of unidentified horsemen heading here, so please halt the negotiations. Get the VIPs out of here. But the garden party doesn’t need to stop. Let their family members stay here.”

After clearing up the rifles and mortar, the JSDF members ran as Itami directed. Sugawara also swiftly gathered up the Senators and his harried actions spoke of the urgency of the situation.

Itami patted Piña’s face with both hands and said “Please pull yourself together. Get a grip.” before she finally returned to normal.

The Senators who heard of the situation from Sugawara were very aware that they could not let their dealings with Japan come to light. If it was discovered that the pro-war faction was preparing for peace talks, the radicals in the faction might well have them assassinated. In addition, they also heard that the Ministry of the Interior would resort to dirty means.

They would surely conclude that “Senators together = preparing for negotiations”, and after listening to scattered fragments of news and rumours, they would blend it with their own thoughts and come to a twisted conclusion. The truth would be lost forever. This would not be an isolated incident.

Therefore, everyone approved of leaving right away. Even if the people approaching were bandits, there was no need to worry. After all, they had just witnessed the terrifying power of Japanese weapons. In addition, they wanted their families to enjoy themselves, so there was no reason to protest the evacuation.

Since both sides had already agreed to negotiations, the fine details could be handled through correspondence. Therefore, the Senators made haste in leaving.

Three HMVs threw up curls of sand as they screeched to a halt. These vehicles were left behind by 1st Recon. A total of six JSDF troopers dismounted and stood before the Senators.

After being shocked by the rifles and the mortar, they were once again left in

awe of these wagons which moved at high speeds without being pulled by a horse. With these, Japan could cross the distance between here and Arnus with a snap of the finger. At the same time, it clearly demonstrated the uselessness of the barrier of distance which the Emperor was counting on.

“Are we going to board these?”

“We’re going to take you to the vicinity of one of the capital’s gates. That is to say, we will drop you at the less crowded southeast gate. Do enjoy the ride.”

The southeast gate opened into the forest, and the gate itself was small. The path leading to it was dark, and probably nobody would be walking down it. The eastern and south sides were poorly lit by the sun because of the wall, and the living conditions there were like a sewer. Naturally, the only people who lived there were on the bottom of the social run, and it was also called the Beggar’s District. It was also called Akusho because of the lack of safety there. Normal people would not go near it without a good reason.

However, because of those reasons, it was the best place to move in and out of the capital without being spotted.

In truth, the JSDF also used the southeast gate. In addition, they were already familiar with the surrounding terrain and they had bought off the guards with cash and Japanese products. They had also met and greeted the criminals of the Black Streets.

With Kurata leading the way, the twenty-odd Senators boarded the HMVs.

After that, the HMVs' engines roared as they sped out, and everyone screamed like it was the first time they were riding a roller-coaster.

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Zorzar led a group of his men to the forest park on the outskirts of the capital, and the HMVs left around the same time. It was a close shave. If one listened carefully, one might be able to hear the sounds of the HMV engines vanishing into the forest. They might not know what it was, but they could probably tell it was headed away from them.

Now, what Zorzar saw was children and their mothers enjoying food, drink and playing all sorts of games, as well, as noblewomen flaunting their gaudy dresses at each other. All he heard was light music, and not the scheming that Count Marx had warned him about. After seeing their merriment, all hatred faded from him, and he did not want to worry about that fading noise.

“What’s this?”

Although he had not been invited, nobody stopped Zorzar from advancing. Everyone could sense that Zorzar and his cronies were directing surprised looks at them.

After examining the women here, he realised that they were all patrician ladies or heiresses. He knew some of them from the courts.

While these ladies were surprised by the people barging in on them, after noticing that he was the first son of the Emperor, they mistakenly thought,

“even the Prince was invited”, and so everyone swept forward to welcome him. After all, the organizer of this party was Princess Piña, so it was hardly unusual for her to invite her older brother as well. He was simply a guest of honor.

Zorzar and his men could not be too rough with them.

In the face of people who had nothing to do with the policy and were of patrician birth to boot, they had to treat them with respect. The way they had to treat the children running underfoot went without saying. Their fierce desire to shout “What’s going on!?” drained away. After dismounting, Zorzar ordered his men to find out what was going on.

“What are you doing here?”

“This garden party was organized by Piña-dono and Sugawara-dono. It’s not an official meeting, just a gathering of various noble families and their children to have fun together. Were you not invited as well, your Highness?”

The one answering him was the elderly head maid. She was getting on in years, but she stood ramrod-straight as she answered the Prince. The fact that she had named his half-sister Piña drew his attention, but not more so than the name “Sugawara” which he had never heard before.

The maids presented wine and all sorts of food to Zorzar and his men. The trays were loaded with many kinds of food. For instance, collagen-rich meat juices were chilled into blocks (with other foods within) and served as a jelly. Then there was the Ma Nuga meat and fruits, and then on another plate there

was flatbread made of wheat, as well as all manner of vegetable and meat dishes. All these things loomed like a mountain in front of them.

Zorzar and friends nervously picked up the unfamiliar food in front of it and put it into his mouth. After that, their expressions changed.

“It’s good!”

The meat jelly bounced as he chewed it and melted in his mouth, and the flavor slowly spread over his tongue. Like a great mixologist’s drink, even kissing a thousand girls would not compare to it. Indeed, the feeling in his mouth was like a lover’s tongue at work. Size, texture and flavor, all these were the crystallization of Furuta’s efforts, producing the highest order of cuisine.

In the blink of an eye, the food in front of them vanished. Zorzar’s men spread out to look for more.

“...Mmm.”

Elsewhere, Zorzar tilted his head, unable to understand the situation. Count Marx should not have lied to him. Even if he did lie to him, it would have done no good for his Ministry. Could it be that he told that lie so he would come to this party? But there should have been a better way to put it.

At least, this place looked like a festival, and not the site of some conspiracy like what Count Marx said. He must have made a mistake somewhere. Perhaps he had gotten the place wrong, and found a place like this while

exploring.

At the same time, his hands were reaching toward the rare food and drinks.

“Mmm...”

Zorzar was used to the palace’s food, but he had never tried these before.

The soup was just a simple boil-up, yet its taste was surprisingly deep. It was golden amber in color and emanated a fragrant scent.

The Ma Nuga meat felt different when he ate it. It practically melted in his mouth before his teeth touched it. This must have been the product of an incredible control of heat in cooking. And then there was the skilful use of salt and other flavors (spices). It was the best Ma Nuga meat he had ever eaten.

Zorzar took mouth after mouth of the meat, savoring the fat juices pouring out into his mouth. Then he went for the next piece. Soon enough, all three trays were empty.

“Ani-sama!” Piña shouted. Zorzar tossed the bone he had finished aside, and looked to her.

As he saw Piña jogging over, he noticed that she did not have her knight game people with her and went “oh?” Then he thought that if she was the organizer of this event, then Count Marx must have gotten something wrong somewhere.

“Ani-sama, what are you doing here all of a sudden?”

Zorzar replied, “What, can’t I be here?” as he reached for his fourth piece of Ma Nuga meat.

Piña certainly did not want him here, but under these circumstances, she could not say so directly. Instead, she replied, “Of course not, how could I leave my elder brother alone? It’s just that you hadn’t shown much interest in this sort of thing. Oh, it’ll taste better with this.” She handed him a batch of mustard that Furuta had specially blended to go with Ma Nuga meat.

Zorzar frowned as he saw the mustard’s color, and its nose-stinging odor. When he bit into the meat, the intense flavor made his eyes water.

“Piña, who made these dishes? Where can I find him?”

He was holding his fifth piece of Ma Nuga meat, this time drizzled with the yellow mustard. He seemed quite fond of it.

Piña looked at the piece of meat before her which was practically painted yellow, and did not know how to answer him. She nervously replied, “I know that person.” Although the one in charge of the actual food preparation were the palace chefs, Furuta of the JSDF was the one who did the flavoring and directed the cooking.

“Have him prepare the royal dinner next time. His Majesty will be pleased.”

“Brother, even if you ask personally, I’m afraid I cannot guarantee that.”

In the courts, a chef did not have a lofty position. Hardly anyone would bring in a low-status chef. However, Zorzar thought nobody was looking and shrugged, and then tried to think of a way around this problem.

“That’s nothing, as long as he doesn’t enter the palace, it should be fine, right? We’ll just say we borrowed someone from a noble family. That should solve the dinner problem.”

Piña thought for a moment that this would be a good chance to let her brother meet a Japanese person. But then she immediately shot that idea down.

Yes, her brother thought he lived in a world where “everything goes according to my will”. Everything good was for his benefit in the world which existed solely to satisfy him. He would discard anything which denied this. Even the truth would become his enemy... no. It was precisely because it was the truth that it was his enemy. At the same time, he would even believe lies as long as they pleased him.

Naturally, the greatest fantasy he had was that the Empire was the strongest power in this world.

Zorzar would not understand that there was a country far more puissant than the Empire on the other side of the Gate, that had already dealt them several crushing defeats and which could not be beaten. In this case, he would turn the truth into his enemy.

Therefore, Piña gave up the idea of showing Zorzar the truth.

The problem was why her brother had come here. It could not possibly have been a coincidence. She decided to ask Zorzar, and the answer she got was “Count Marx told me to come here.”

“Did he say that, exactly?”

“No, just something like it.”

“Then, what did he say?”

Zorzar clicked his tongue at Piña’s incessant questions and replied, “He said there were people gathered here to plot and conspire. He must have messed up. Think nothing of it!”

After that, he joined his cronies in assaulting the other food stalls. They even chased away the kids gathered around the ice-cream maid.

As Piña watched him leave, she muttered “Count Marx” under her breath over and over again.

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Zorzar and the others did not just eat their fill, but they carried a lot of food away.

There was only just enough food for the garden party, so in the face of these rapacious intruders, a food shortage immediately developed. They took the entire tub of ice cream (and very nearly the maid too). The young men and women began circulating whispers about the poor manners of the first prince.

Because of them, Piña, Sugawara, Itami, the JSDF troopers and the maids had nothing to eat. Those maids who had pinched some food were lucky, but Itami and the musicians were left without anything to fill their bellies.

Even so, they continued smiling, as they watched the patricians and their families leave, then, their faces set with a grim determination, they set about the task of cleaning up.

Piña and Sugawara stood in a corner of the forest garden, which was quiet again. As they watched Itami and the others at work, the old head maid brought out some herbal tea for them, and some of the leftovers of Furuta's fish bone dessert (she was surprised that it could actually be eaten after suitable flavoring with salt and pepper), and then they began discussing the reason for Zorzar's intrusion.

"We should think of this as a warning by Count Marx."

"Could it be a recon by fire? Because he wasn't sure what we were doing, he barged in directly to see our response?"

"It's not impossible, but Ani-sama would not use a recon by fire or whatever. He and his men are hot-headed and a clever ruse like a recon by fire is beyond him."

"They don't have anyone who can make calm, rational decisions among them, so it does not follow they could perform a recon by fire. It would be best to treat their actions as a warning. However, after considering your

brother's position, he might be preparing for a direct attack."

"Indeed, if he had seen the Senators discussing business with furtive expressions on their faces, Ani-sama would have gladly scattered the party and captured everyone. Senators gathering together to discuss things is not a crime, so even if one wanted to report them for it, nothing would happen. But Ani-sama would not think of such things. That's just how he is."

Because he could not suppress them using the law, Zorzar would instead openly arrest the Senators, charge them with treason and accuse them of conspiring against the Empire. Those were the high-handed means he favored.

Naturally, the Senators would object. After all, Zorzar's actions were very objectionable. In addition, this was not a lawful arrest. And if the Senators were charged with treason, the Senate would become powerless. Even in wartime, it was only natural to maintain communications with representatives of the enemy. Otherwise, the war would go on until one side was completely destroyed.

However, regardless of the legitimacy of the approach, the hearts of the people would be more easily swayed by an emotional approach.

Although people often said, "Let's talk it out", when Zorzar painted the Senator's actions with the words "treason" and "defeatism", the pro-war faction's blood would be boiling with anger.

Once that happened, everything the Senate/pro-peace faction said would be

shouted down, and the influence of the Emperor/pro-war faction would increase.

“I see, so that was what Count Marx was aiming for.”

However, this was not all.

The passionate action Zorzar incited was like getting drunk on strong wine. The next day, one would wake up and be embarrassed by their ugly actions. Even if the Senate did not recover as quickly as a man did from a night of drunkenness, they would eventually realise what they had done several days later.

After calming down from their excitement, the voices condemning the pro-peace faction, who had done nothing wrong, would become softer. At the same time, the number of voices criticizing Zorzar would increase.

Many people would frown on the disturbance caused by Zorzar’s rabble-rousing. There would be more voices calling for the removal of Zorzar from the succession and passing the throne to his brother Diabo. However, even if Zorzar was eliminated, Diabo was still part of the Senate faction, so that would not be good for Count Marx at all.

Thanks to the calming effects of the herbal tea, Piña managed to cool her head and begin connecting the dots. The points of data formed a beautiful line, which she carefully wove to prevent the whole thing from breaking down, until they finally formed a full picture for her to see.

“In any case, Count Marx has found us out. We were lucky to avoid his scheme this time, but who knows what he’ll try after this?”

“If we look at it from the perspective of disrupting the peace process, then the most effective course of action would be to assassinate the responsible people. If he goes by legal means, then he would arrest anyone with a differing opinion, any intellectuals opposed to him, as well as anyone related to the media, right? After that, he would stir up the peoples’ fighting spirit in debate in order to give the military a free hand in doing things.”

The methods Sugawara mentioned struck a chord in Piña’s heart.

“Arrest them all?” (By the way, Piña had no idea what the media was, so she ignored it.)

The words “high treason” came to mind. As she thought, “It can’t be”, she began to feel uneasy. Those words were not exactly uncommon in the Empire’s history.

“You need to remind the Senators to be watchful of those around them.”

If Count Marx was really planning to hang the crime of high treason on them, then there was no point being watchful. However, the process of arrest, sentencing and punishment would need a certain amount of evidence and witnesses, so they would need to make sure they did not incriminate themselves from normal speech.

As she thought about that, it all fell into place. She linked Zorzar to the

charge of high treason.

“If Ani-sama was attacked today, it might have become the *casus belli* needed for a purge.”

Once the pro-war faction was roused to anger, they would damn the pro-impeachment Senators with accusations of high treason and eliminate them all in one swift movement. By the time they calmed down from their bloodlust, it would be too late.

“Your Highness, do you think Count Marx will use the charge of high treason to mount a purge?”

Piña could only shrug as she replied to Sugawara.

“I don’t think so. The jurors would all be Senators. Even the pro-Emperor faction would not find them guilty, as long as their minds were clear. False testimony cannot hold up for long under extended investigation and debate. Count Marx’s plan needs to be accomplished before the Senators regain their calm,” Piña muttered as she scratched her head.

“I’m just a mediator, why do I have to worry about all of this...”

She had just been freed of the burdens weighing her down, and now more of them had appeared. The troublesome situation, the stubborn pro-Emperor faction, the scheming Count Marx, and then the easily-used Zorzar, the list of hateful factors was full once again.

However, this concerned the country’s future.

It was precisely because Piña was a member of the Imperial family that she took her duty to the Empire so seriously. If she could do something about the situation and did not, she would be guilty by inaction.

The stress on her had just been relieved, and now the pressure was back again. However, because of that, Piña's mind began to clear.

"In any case, today should be fine. However, if Marx really plans to use the charge of high treason to mount a purge, he will make other moves. We need to evade those and prepare for the impeachment and talks," Piña told Sugawara.

"Right now, the most important thing is to speak with Marquis Casel. After that, we need to get the Senate to agree on the negotiations and talks, in order to tie the Count's hands. However, this is not a job for myself as a mediator, or yourself, Sugawara-dono, as an envoy of the enemy."

"Then, who should we look for?"

"Hm. Lord Cicero should do."

After Piña finished, she rose, highlighting the beautiful curves of her body.

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"Zorral took the bait, but we did not catch a fish. What a shame."

The Emperor, seated on his throne in the audience chamber, looked at Count

Marx. He noted the man's lowered head and sighed.

"Well, that's fine. We will have more chances. There's no need to be hasty."

"However, if this goes on, the Senate will rule to begin the negotiations. Should we not do something now?"

"Don't be mistaken, Count Marx. I have no intention to deny these talks. If they want to talk, then let them talk, as much as they like. But I will not give them so much as a hair in concessions."

"However, with things as they are, it may be difficult to follow that course."

"That's nothing. All we need to do is make sure they never reach a decision. If they want to talk with the enemy so much, then let them talk forever. They need to negotiate to begin negotiations, they have to vote on when the negotiations will begin, they have to vote on the conditions they have and so on. If they have to debate over each and every little detail, they will make no progress. Sooner or later the enemy will give up on negotiations."

"Your Majesty's wisdom is fathomless and farsighted. Your servant is awed by your prowess."

"Count, proceed as you see fit. However, in the end, we must secure a military victory. If you lose, I won't forgive you."

"Yes. Your servant shall accomplish it with all his might."

Marx lowered his head once more.

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*Nagata-cho Prime Minister's Residence.*

“Prime Minister. The report from Sugawara in the Special Region has arrived.”

The secretary from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivered the document to the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Morita, Motoi’s successor, adjusted his glasses as he received the document before opening and reading it.

“I see. The foundations for the peace talks have already been laid. Now we need to send Vice-Minister Shirayuro Reiko over to the Special Region. Has the Ministry of Foreign Affairs chosen the people to handle the work?”

“Yes. However, the report also indicated that forces exist which oppose the peace talks. We are somewhat worried about the safety aspect.

“Oh?”

Morita flipped through the pages. After he closed the report, he looked like he was talking about someone else.

“Well, it should be fine. There should be a way.”

“That is incorrect, sir. The report also mentions that the Empire’s military is

stirring.”

“Is that not why we sent the JSDF there?”

“Indeed, that is why.”

The man from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs retreated to the back of the Prime Minister’s office with gritted teeth, thinking *what do you mean, it should be fine?* Morita had only been Prime Minister for several months, and already he was wondering if he should have been trusted with the position. The way he talked about things like they didn’t concern him was very frustrating. Although he hoped that Morita would be a wise and long-sighted man, he did not get that impression from him at all. For example:

“The problem should be China, Russia, and America, right?”

“And the EU, sir.”

“The matter of the Special Region should have been mentioned in the summit meeting.”

“They already asked us to disclose the details of the Special Region at the last meeting.”

“So why don’t we do that?”

“Hah? Are you serious?

If Russia, America, China or the EU knew what resources there were in the

Special Region, they would be even harder to manage than they were already.

A planet's worth of resources would be effectively unlimited. Every country in the world would kill their way to Japan, where the Gate was, in order to secure those resources.

And then, if they tried to avoid diplomatic pressure by keeping the details of the Special Region a secret, it would be a clear sign that Japan wanted to monopolize the Gate for itself. All Japan could do was keep a low profile and try to keep the surrounding nations calm. If they found out about all the treasures beyond the Gate, they would all demand free access to the Gate.

What waited there was pressure and violence.

In reality, actions took place, and then meanings were assigned to them. The final resort in reality was always violence. In the face of massive violence, no appeals to peace would be successful.

Even if they somehow survived the application of force, the enemy, would gather even more force to seize the Gate. Once that happened, reasoning and international accords would have no use. After all, there were things like Israel constantly oppressing the people of Palestine in defiance of UN decree and Korea violating the Treaty of San Francisco to illegally occupy Japan's Takeshima islands. The only way to solve these problems was to back one's words with force. That way, both parties could confidently make their demands and the problem could be solved.

Now, it seemed like Japan and the other nations were acting out some sort of

play.

Other Nation (anyone would do): “Oh, open the Gate. Let me see. Let me in!”

Japan: “No, the Gate is here, it’s mine. I’m the one suffering over there!”

Other Nation: “Oh, shut up, I won’t forgive anyone who keeps good things to themselves!”

Japan: “Don’t be so childish. I already said I didn’t want to lay sole claim to it.”

Other Nation: “Fine, if that’s what you think, I’ll take it by force!”

Japan: “If that’s what you think, we’ll give the things in the Gate to our friends, and of course our enemies will have nothing. Where are my friends~”

(America raises a hand) “We have a treaty~ (please sir, may I have some more?)”

If the EU saw this, most of them would raise their hands as well.

In fact, just about everyone would say, “I’m your friend too, let me in, give me some”, so in the end there would be no enemies.

Japan: “Like I said, sit there and watch. We don’t know what exactly is inside.”

Then back to the top, from the beginning.

The job of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to keep people from saying “Hey, that guy wants to take the Gate for himself, let’s all gang up and control it together!” and to keep things like that from happening.

Because of that, information about the Gate had to be kept secret. Once many nations took control of it, there was no telling how the situation would proceed. So they would keep things secret and occasionally leak a bit of information to their allies, so as to keep them docile under the expectation of more goodies.

They told the Americans that the nation called the Empire existed, as well as the state of its surrounding vassal countries, so rather than taking control through the military, they should sign a trade treaty since they had already pinpointed potential resource caches, and they had agreed.

To America, if they signed a treaty with the Empire, then their companies with branches in Japan could take economic action in the Special Region, without a need to secure their investments with a military occupation. Just handling Iraq and Afghanistan was troublesome enough for President Darryl, so he gave serious thought to the matter of the Special Region.

In truth, their Ministry of Defense had already predicted that a large-scale military invasion through the Gate — situated as it was in traffic jam-prone Ginza — would be impossible.

The Gate was not very big. At the most, it could fit one fighter aircraft or three to four large trucks side by side.

The American army used a lot of weapons, ammunition, food and fuel to mount a campaign. This would require them to completely seal off Tokyo and convert their roads into dedicated supply lines. However, the Gate's dimensions could not be changed, so it would be like filling a 50 meter long Olympic swimming pool with a kitchen tap; it would be a waste of time and effort. And then there was the matter of the campaign's cost.

In addition, really big transport vehicles would not be able to fit through the Gate. Perhaps it would work if they were completely disassembled for transportation to the other side. At most, they could only send tanks and helicopters through.

What this meant was that the JSDF had made the right decision by waiting around the Gate. After building up their forces, they would take the important objectives in one go. This was the best way.

The Japanese government was also agonizing over that bottleneck when it came to shipping resources home from the Special Region. After all, a financial district like Ginza simply did not have big enough roads to accommodate the flow of transport trucks needed.

If they decided to build underpasses and overhead bridges, they would need to decide how long those paths would run, and that would cause another round of problems from the resource-extracting companies.

Therefore, the secretary had not taken Morita's "So why don't we do that?" as a serious order. He looked at Morita like he was a lunatic.

Just thinking of Morita annoyed him.

"Of course I'm not serious. I've thought about it, but I'll handle this objectively, so don't worry."

That was what the secretary thought after the fact, but if things went poorly, Morita might casually release information because it was troublesome.

## **Note**

The book described Pina's heart soaring like a PA3 guided missile, which is the latest version of the MIM-104 Patriot missile system.

## Chapter 7

The JSDF's activities in the Imperial capital had begun. In order to give Sugawara the support of the common folk, the JSDF's Special Region Expeditionary force had set up several bases of operation throughout the capital. They were places like the warehouses of the ALC's Imperial capital branch, or the second floor of a tavern, but the thing they had in common was that they were places where people could move in and out without being noticed. The most obvious of these was a rented mansion near the capital's southeastern gate.

It was technically within the capital's city limits, but there were all kinds of different races and species here. Ordinary citizens would never go near this place.

Every few steps, a pickpocket would try their luck, and behind there would be people following. It could be compared to Hong Kong's Kowloon district.

Almost none of the rows of shops belonged to proper businesses.

They sold all sorts of lewd tools, various drugs, and slaves captured from all over the continent.

Of course, people had to live here, so there were also shops which sold food and clothing. However, everything on sale here was strange. The clothes on sale might be stained with blood or rent from a cut, and the shops even sold grass from the roadside. As for the butchers, one always had to be suspicious of their purchases, lest one accidentally end up buying human meat.

Because this place was called Akusho, a lot of the men here were either

humans with blades bared, Werewolf Beastmen who were every bit as ferocious and bloodthirsty as the weapons they carried, or Four-Arms. One could also see the odd Goblin or Ogre in the distance. Many of the remnants of the Coalition Army came here to be thieves, enforcers, mercenaries, or to do some form of violent work. In any event, they were all villains.

As for the women, there were girls who looked lewdly around their surroundings, or those who stared blankly into the distance like vegetables as fragrant smoke wreathed them. None of them had a proper job, and most of them were prostitutes.

The species present included: Humans, Warrior Bunnies, Catpeople, Dogpeople, Lamias, several horned species, and winged species like Harpies or Winged Men. The men in the streets ogled them lasciviously, while the women responded with bewitching smiles, and a coy offer of, “Want to play?”

In this place, the strong fed on the weak. Therefore, the people here paid no heed to corpses on the street. Did it appear yesterday? Today? Well, even if it happened tomorrow, nobody would care, because this was a way of life for the people here. This was not Arnus. It absorbed the very worst elements of the Imperial Capital and continued festering in the darkness.

The JSDF chose this place for a simple reason: in this melting pot of people, nobody would notice an extra strange fellow or two. There were other gates where many people came and went, but the people there were ordinary cityfolk, and anyone who stood out would attract a lot of attention. This place, on the other hand, was where people who did dirty work lived. It was

important that these people were here.

The thing was, whatever happened in Akusho would not make it out of the district. In that sense, it was perfect for secrecy. However, the flip side of that was that there were several notable individuals in Akusho.

The JSDF were much better-mannered than the people on the streets, and they paid well.

When they hired people for requests, they always paid twice as much as the crime bosses here. They had ruled these streets from the beginning, and to these crime bosses — Gonzori, Medusa, Paramounte and Bessara — the JSDF were eyesores.

These JSDF people came from elsewhere, bought a house, and then acted all secretive. They did not even know how to properly greet the bosses. They even dared to ignore the rules of the street and the power of the bosses. And because they always paid so much, the people who traditionally feared the old bosses were now getting rebellious. They were truly a bunch of annoying people.

All these small aggravations piled up, and the bosses of the district became angry.

One of them — Bessara — started thinking, “Since they’ve got all that money to throw around, they must have a big stash. Why don’t we nip over and help ourselves to some of it?” So he gathered his men and punks from the street to attack the JSDF’s Akusho base of operations.

And then, what greeted them was a baptism of hot lead.

The looted H&K MP7s and FN P90s provided by Itami and friends found a use here. Naturally, the servicemen were very well equipped. In this sort of unconventional warfare, the rules were very simple: kill your enemy when you saw him. Nothing else mattered.

And so, the brave men of 5th Recon who were manning the base welcomed their attackers with a hail of bullets. Bessara's men were slaughtered in seconds and their corpses piled up.

It was over after the first round of fire.

Not only had Bessara lost all his men, but his own home had been blown up. Without men or a dwelling place, Bessara had also lost the fighting power to protect himself and give him authority. And then, in the next moment he paid for his life of lawlessness.

The residents of Akusho, many of whom had lost their wives, children and other relatives to his vile activities, surrounded him and stabbed him with knives and swords until he looked like a pincushion, and then dumped him in an alley.

After seeing his gruesome remains, the people on the streets muttered to each other, "The JSDF is untouchable."

The Gonzori, Medusa and Paramount families did not join the Bessaras in their attack, and so they were spared. When they realised that the JSDF did

not intend to claim the Bessaras' share of profits, which was to say, the income from his brothels and his protection money, they breathed a sigh of relief and reached a common understanding that nobody was to make a move against the JSDF.

Although they were an unpleasant bunch of people, they were good businessmen, and they knew trouble was bad for business. So they changed their minds, and approached the JSDF for work.

The JSDF wanted information, and pawns that could collect that information. Under request from the JSDF, the crime bosses gathered their pickpockets and thieves and had them spy on the patricians' actions. Sometimes, they would enter their houses and steal books, and protected themselves by showing their worth and usefulness.

Simply put, the JSDF were treated like conquerors. It was only natural that the strong could do whatever they wanted in Akusho. People might praise those who defied the strong on the surface, but in their hearts they would curse the defiant for fools, and these defiant people would not live long.

In addition, when people approached the JSDF with evil intentions, they would maintain their composure and politely ask them to stop.

When they saw illegal activity, they had frustrated looks on their faces, as well as feeling sympathy for the plight of others.

As a result, the men of Akusho were, regardless of species, both fearful and respectful of the JSDF.

In contrast, the women had mixed feelings about them.

Simply put, they could not like them.

No matter what temptations they used, the men of the JSDF were unmoved. Since they had so much money, what was wrong with spending a little on them? But no matter how they fluttered their eyelashes, or what seductive words they spoke, the JSDF men did not respond.

It was true that the men on the streets were richer thanks to them, and in turn the women had bigger earnings. However, the women still wanted the JSDF to spend money on them, because that was how a woman's heart worked.

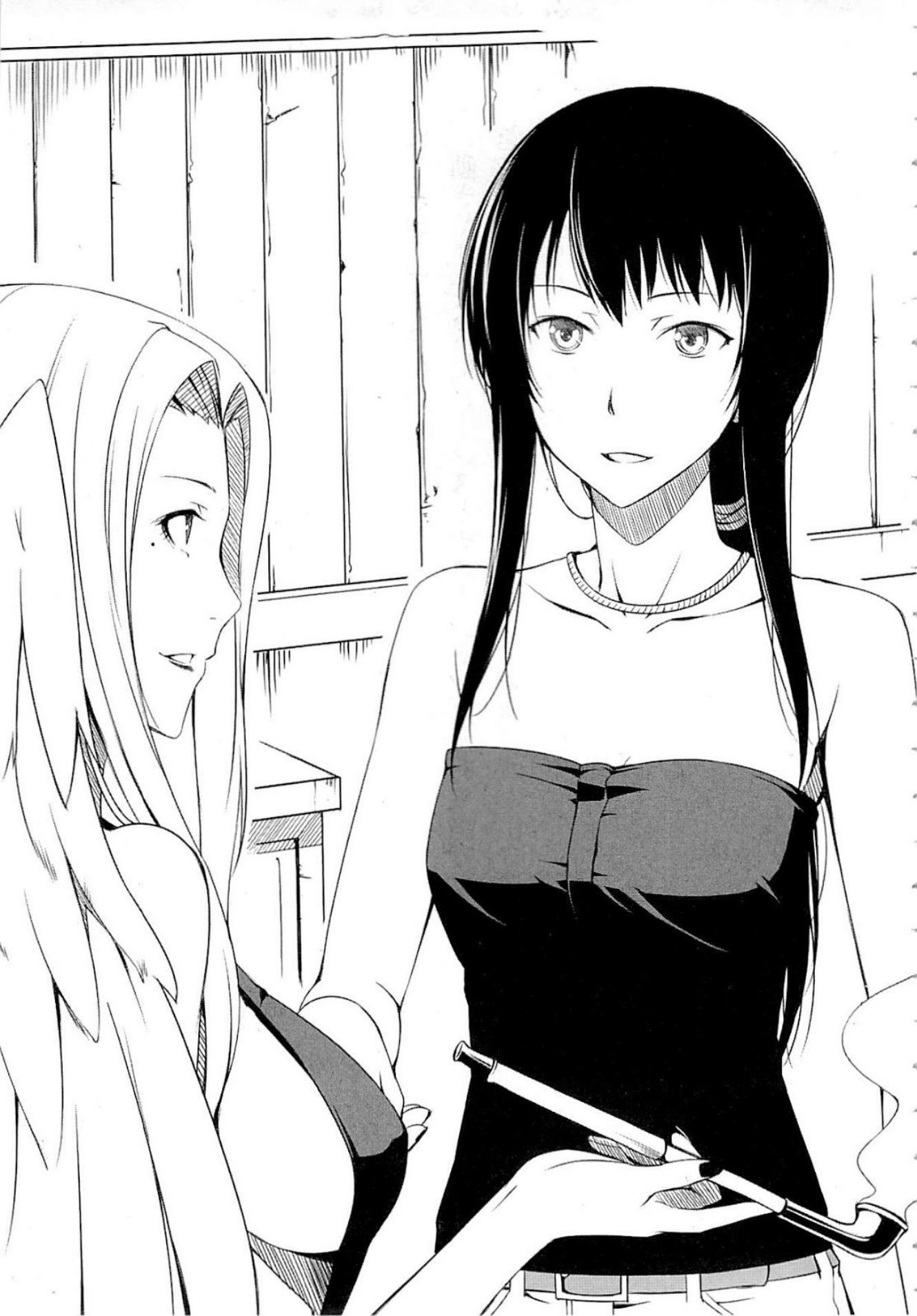
But even when they shouted, "Are you really men? You impotent bastards!" all the JSDF did was shrug and steadfastly refuse to take the bait.

This was why they seemed sweet on them on the surface, but inwardly resented them.

However, what changed everything was the clinic run by a female nurse who changed every few days. It offered checkups, pregnancy tests as well as information and counselling related to contraception and other related issues. It changed the way their lives went.

The contraceptives and other such devices sold here were an irreplaceable aid for their jobs.

"Oh, is Kurokawa on duty tonight?"



The woman called Mizari, who was surrounded in a cloud of marijuana-infused smoke, entered the treatment room. Unlike the way she was on the streets, she had lowered her guard.

After all, this was the only place on the street which was safe, besides her nest. No, she could not even relax in her own nest. This might be the only place she could let her guard down. After all, when a certain crime family made a move against the JSDF, they had been massacred for their audacity.

Everyone knew what would happen when the JSDF raised their hand to strike.

Kurokawa was dressed in comfortable jeans and a tube top. She took a couple of copper coins from the woman with a pair of wings protruding from her back (a Winged Woman), and handed Mizari a box of the rubber contraceptives. They took payment because “This was not a charity”. The people who lived in Akusho did so with pride, so the JSDF had to respect that pride and their ability to earn money by accepting their coins.

A self-righteous person might think this was enabling behavior, but in truth this sort of thing had a powerful social impact.

When one was poor, one did not have the time to worry about pretty ideals. Instead, a person had to eat, and selling one’s body was a perfectly acceptable way to earn one’s next meal. It was not as though they were inconveniencing others by doing it. It was all well and good to try and assail their way of life with logic, but one had to consider the situation they were in

first. The thing which troubled them most in their trade was accidental pregnancies. Given the medical technology of the Special Region, an abortion might well result in death, so the risk to their health was very high.

In addition, it was unclear if there were sexually-transmitted diseases in the Special Region.

The reason why Kurokawa and her fellow servicewomen were doing this was because the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare wanted to find out if they existed.

They were concerned that the JSDF personnel might bring back a disease with them from the Special Region, much like how Columbus brought syphilis back to Europe and caused an epidemic. The male servicemen had also been strictly warned about this.

“Kurokawa, you won’t tell me to stop smoking, will you?”

The other WACs (women’s army corps) kept on nagging Mizari to stop. That was because the Special Region’s tobacco was infused with strange herbs which were bad for the skin and internal organs. Regardless of whether it was good or bad, they nagged her anyway.

However, Kurokawa simply shrugged. “I could, but you need it, right?”

“Huh, you understand? Do you have experience with this sort of thing?”

Mizari was referring to prostitution.

“No, I was just thinking, I couldn’t do your job if I couldn’t smoke.”

The Winged Woman's pretty mouth turned downward into a frown.

"Cheh. I hate high-and-mighty women like you."

"That's fine, I'm not here to win a popularity contest."

Mizari frowned at Kurokawa. Kurokawa, not to be outdone, made a funny face at her with her fingers. After a while, the tension between them evaporated, and Mizari laughed.

"You're so childish. Just like me."

"That's true. I don't feel much different from yesterday, so I doubt the me from twenty years ago would be much different from myself today."

This made Mizari snort in laughter, and then she rose. "All right, I'd best get back to making money." Then she puffed a cloud of smoke into Kurokawa's face.

Kurokawa waved her hand to disperse the smoke. It was plainly deliberate. The two of them lived in different worlds, so it would be best if they kept their distance.

Then, she suddenly thought of something else, and asked a question.

"What if... what if I told you there was a way for you to not have to smoke this, or work like this?"

However, Mizari simply looked at Kurokawa like she was an idiot.

“How could someone like me work such a wonderful job like that? All I know how to do is spread my legs for men and show them my ass. That’s what I do. That’s all I do.”

“Have you heard of a place called Arnus?”

“Ah, that place. I heard it’s like Heaven. But don’t you need a recommendation to get in? Besides, I don’t have any special skills. If I went there, I’d just be doing what I do now.”

*And what if I told you I could give you such a recommendation? What about that?* These words started in Kurokawa’s throat. But just as she was about to open her mouth, she remembered Itami scolding her, “What can you do?” Her resentment toward Itami from that time remained in her heart, and when Mizari said “I don’t have any special skills”, she felt that there was a lot the Winged Woman wasn’t saying.

*If she could find a proper job in Arnus, Mizari wouldn’t need to stand in the dark at night,* Kurokawa thought.

Mizari smiled to the speechless Kurokawa before turning away. She took a puff, and returned to her working girl’s full-hipped sashay as she hit the streets once again.

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When Mizari visited Kurokawa again, it was well past midnight.

Most of the time, the prostitute would have gotten one or two, perhaps even three johns by now. The only ones moving around at this time of night were women. There were no men in sight.

While those soiled doves who had not gotten any business yet would be throwing themselves at men, those fallen women who had hit their quota for the night would retire to their homes to rest. In other words, one could tell which of the whores knew their trade well.

It was at this time that Mizari brought her fellow prostitutes to the JSDF base of operations, which momentarily panicked Kurokawa. After all, the Bessara attack had been fairly recent.

She grabbed her handgun from a drawer and stuffed it into her pants. As a servicewoman, she was very familiar with its use.

“Kurokawa, we’ve got something to tell you.”

When she opened the door, she saw a very nervous-looking Mizari. She seemed to be looking around, as though she were afraid of something.

The streetwalkers with her also seemed very worried. Kurokawa had the feeling that something abnormal was going on.

Kurokawa opened the door to let them in.

“Inside. Hurry.”

And so, the ladies of the evening poured into the basement, whose pitch-dark

interior was brilliantly lit by the fluorescent lamps that were powered by the portable generator within.

The girls could not help but be frightened of the fluorescent lights, having only ever been exposed to candlelight or lamplight. Some of them looked directly at the light and squinted. However, light had a way of wiping away unease. Mizari smiled and said, “Well, that’s a big help for my bird eyes.” The other girls managed to relax enough to share their thoughts on the situation before flopping down onto the chairs and the bed used for treatment, while those who couldn’t find a space either sat on the floor or leaned against the walls.

After everyone found their place, Kurokawa spoke.

“All right, what happened? Why did all of you come here?”

Mizari answered on their behalf.

“All of us can sense what’s going to happen on the streets, no, in the Capital. But the trick is that we don’t tell, don’t ask, and pretend nothing happened. That’s how we survive in these streets.”

The girls nodded as one.

“So with that in mind, this child’s name is Tuwal. Please listen to her, and help us.”

As Mizari said that, she brought out Tuwal, who had wings like she did, but was from a different species. Tuwal was a Harpy. Winged Men had wings on

their backs, but Harpies had wings in place of their arms.

“Please, help us.”

Kurokawa was unable to answer. After all, they had not explained anything at all.

She asked them to continue talking about what was going on. After all, she could not help them if she did not know where to start.

However, Mizari simply asked Kurokawa for help again. All she said was that she hoped Kurokawa could help them.

“Ahhhh, what a pain! If you help us, we’ll do anything you want in future!”

In the end, Kurokawa gave up. She realised she could not handle this by herself, so she went upstairs to wake up Sergeant-Major Kuwabara.

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That night, the Imperial Capital was shaken by an earthquake.

After hearing a distant rumbling from the distance, the earth suddenly began to shake violently.

The problem was that the city had never experienced an earthquake before, and so the buildings were not protected against the violent shaking. They were made of stones stacked on top of each other, and so the more fragile buildings collapsed.

That being the case, the foundations of the Capital's streets were not completely destroyed. But the true damage was to the hearts of the cityfolk.

Because there was no seismograph on hand, no exact figures could be taken, but from the spread of the destruction, it seemed to be around a magnitude 4 to 5 earthquake.

The earthquake occurred in the middle of the night, so it took the Capital completely by surprise.

They were thrown out of bed while soundly asleep, and they were too drowsy from sleep to properly panic at first. Various objects began falling to the floor like rain, including things like shelves and objects hanging from the ceiling.

When the cabinets collapsed, the sharp fragments from shattering vases and ceramic cookware was enough to cause cuts. The fragments littered the floor, so there was no place to stand.

The people of the Capital believed that the earth would not move. That was what it meant to be “as solid as a rock”.

Water flowed, wind blew, fire burned, wood grew. But the earth did not move. That was a fundamental principle of the world. When that preconception was shattered, everyone thought the world was going to end. This terror was deeply engraved on the people's souls, leaving grievous spiritual wounds.

Predicting this disaster would have been difficult even for the scientifically

advanced Japan. It was not impossible, but only a god or a being with far better sensory abilities than a human could have done it.

However, in the Special Region, there were people who approached these two categories. There were some people who saw the disaster coming.

The Harpy Tuwal felt a sudden chill throughout her body as she saw off her second john.

At first, she thought it was a cold, because her body was sweating profusely.

Because the second man had a lot of stamina, she did not even have the time to collect her money and clean up. She wanted to stand up a few times, but she could not because there was no strength in her body and her skin was gradually getting colder. However, the shaking in her body was slightly different from a cold. It was like someone was pulling her hair from behind. And then, she lost strength in her waist and legs, like she was afraid.

Then, she remembered. Towal had experienced something like this before.

In the past, she and her kind lived in the South, where the volcanoes were. She had felt like this just before the volcanoes erupted. Yes, this was a premonition of an “earthquake”.

But even if she felt that way, there were no volcanoes near the Imperial Capital.

She had not been here long, but she had never heard of an earthquake here before. Therefore, she wondered if she had gotten things wrong. However,

the mounting frustration and fear in her heart would not die down. Therefore, Tuwal sought out Mizari, her mentor, to discuss things.

The fact was that Mizari and the other prostitutes also felt the same nameless dread. It was a feeling which told them they could not stay here, that they had to run as quickly as possible.

However, she had never experienced or heard of an earthquake before, so she did not understand why she was feeling uneasy and afraid. Fortunately, she understood because of Tuwal. Thus, they immediately went to look for the men who usually protected them. Usually, they would take off their shirts and say, “I’ll protect you.” That attitude would have been useful now.

However, the men just felt that the women were being annoying and refused to acknowledge their fears. Their reactions were along the lines of, “Earthquake? You’d best go back and make more money.” Of course, they felt the same fear too, but they could not bring themselves to openly acknowledge it.

The unease grew stronger and stronger in the meantime. In the end, they decided to abandon the useless men and went to Kurokawa for help.

The commander of the JGSDF Akusho Operations Base (as it was commonly known), Major Nyutabara, received Kurokawa and Kuwabara’s reports, and promptly had a headache. He had no experience when it came to handling earthquake reports, and he doubted the provenance of the reports in any case.

However, Tuwal’s ancestors were avian species. Nyutabara had been

stationed at Himeji Garrison and Shibata Garrison in Niigata, and he had personally experienced earthquakes twice. For some reason, the memory of how the wild birds near the bases had vanished just before the earthquakes stood out brilliantly in his mind. If they could have spoken to the birds, perhaps they could have predicted those earthquakes.

The girls' senses might be keener than humans. If it turned out they were wrong, then they could laugh it off as a joke. Therefore, it made sense to treat their words as the truth, and adopt the requisite countermeasures. He thought about this, and made his decision.

The preparations were not a big deal, for the servicemen who had grown up in earthquake-prone regions. They had learned how to deal with these problems from a young age. They used the wireless to communicate their people scattered throughout the Capital and ordered them to extinguish their fires. Then, they grabbed their equipment, weapons, food and medical supplies and headed for a wide, open area, being wary of things which might fall on their heads, as well as taking care to stay away from large buildings, cliffs and the water's edge.

These were very simple things, but for people who had never experienced earthquakes before, they would have had a hard time thinking of these.

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Piña grumbled as Sugawara woke her up for a walk in the forest outside the palace. Hamilton followed her in a half-asleep state. After all, her job as a scribe was very tiring.

Itami, Kuribayashi and Tomita were assigned as Sugawara's guards, so after they received Nyutabara's wireless transmission, they brought Piña and the others to a safe place despite doubting the reports. In addition, Itami was in his uniform, while Kuribayashi and Tomita were in their combat fatigues and fully armed, with an extra pistol each.

The maids and Piña's torch-bearing guards could not hide their worry. They were only following because they knew they had to follow Piña no matter what.

Even if they explained that the earth would shake and what would happen after that, the maids would not be able to imagine it. It would be like trying to understand what it would be like to fall from the sky.

Therefore, when the earthquake came, they received a massive shock.

First, there was the gentle trembling that marked the early stages of an earthquake.

“Oh, it’s coming, it’s coming...”

The length of this period made Itami say, “Looks like it’s going to be a big one.”

There was a correlation between the length of the initial trembling and the distance to the epicenter of the earthquake. This meant that when one calculated the distance to the epicenter, the stronger the early vibrations, the bigger the earthquake would be.

After this, the real shaking started.

The earth heaved as though it had been struck mightily.

It was roughly 30 to 40 seconds before the quake tapered off. However, for those people in the Imperial Capital who had encountered an earthquake for the first time, it seemed like an eternity.

Piña wailed. She thought that the world was collapsing. Beside her, Sugawara and Itami said, “Ohh, it really came.”

As she saw Itami, Kuribayashi and Tomita standing around calmly, Piña’s eyes filled with fearlessness and a determination not to lose out to this earthquake. She imagined that they would probably maintain their cool even if the ground vanished from under their feet.

Itami was a man who would look for excuses to slack off when he was tired of annoying things. Either that, or he would immediately flee them. He did not seem to have any of the qualities of a warrior. Yet, at this moment, he seemed perfectly calm and composed.

The maids and soldiers fell prone in terror.

The sounds of the rooted trees swaying and the sound of the leaves grinding against the wind sounded like the movements of a huge monster. The maids cried and screamed, while the soldiers shouted in response. However, they, like Piña, saw the same thing; Itami, Tomita and Kuribayashi, looking around their surroundings like nothing was happening.

The steadfast forms reminded them of the gods.

The maids grabbed at Tomita's and Kuribayashi's legs one after the other, while the soldiers looked at them with admiration, as though they were invincible heroes.

"Well, if it's only this much, it shouldn't be a problem. The weaker parts of the walls might collapse, but the rest should be fine. Can't say the same if we were closer to the epicenter, though."

The shaking stopped after a while.

Piña heard Itami's calm analysis as she was left adrift in detached silence, but her thought processes were on hold, so she could only nod and answer "Mm".

As the guards heard Tomita and Kuribayashi asking, "Are you all right? Is anyone hurt?" they immediately straightened up upon hearing the words of their heroes. They were currently in a state of abject submission. As mentioned before, this was the psychological impact of an earthquake on people who had never experienced it before.

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It was roughly the same in Akusho.

The quake struck as they were leading the women out of the southeast gate. Fearful cries and shouts came from all over the streets.

Because the paths in Akusho were very narrow, all sorts of things fell off the roofs.

Nyutabara shouted, ordering everyone to gather in the center of the street, then Kuwabara and Kurokawa echoed the shout down the line.

The women obediently gathered in the middle of the street, grabbing their hair and wailing as they did. After that, they knelt down one by one.

Kuwabara and the others began bantering, “Ohh, it’s starting.” “Really? Seems like a big one.” “Tuwal-san, you need to get a job at the Japanese Meteorological Agency”. Naturally, anyone would think they were reliable, and so the women hugged their legs.

The men laughed as the girls plastered themselves onto them.

In particular, Kurata was trembling in delight, thinking *my body is happy, my legs are happy too* as a group of Beastwomen hugged him.

Kurokawa was not particularly interested in this sort of thing, but she did not mind being clung to, and she gently patted Mizari to calm her down as she sobbed on Kurokawa’s chest.

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Because Itami and the others protected and helped to evacuate them, Piña’s spirit returned quickly. When she heard that there might be aftershocks after a big earthquake, she said, “I need to get to his Majesty.” She was worried for

her father, but also concerned about the state of the court.

Since Piña said so, Itami and co. had no objections. “Is that so. Then, take care when you go.” Piña looked like she had seen the apocalypse as she heard those words, or maybe it was a girl being jilted by her lover. Either way, she pressed her pale face against Itami.

“Won’t, won’t you go with me?”

“It’s not that, I’m just saying, the Emperor... going to his side like this might not be good.”

From Piña’s point of view, Itami and the others were soldiers of an enemy nation. Bringing them to the Emperor’s side would be like checkmating herself. If this were a RTS game, it would be like enemy paratroopers landing in one’s home base.

However, the fact was that Itami and company were Sugawara’s guards, so something like pointing a gun at the Emperor was absolutely forbidden. However, the JSDF’s words were just words. Piña had to be ready for anything.

Still, Piña was insisting that they go with her. Itami and Sugawara looked at each other, wondering what was to be done.

“Itami-dono. Please, stay by my side.”

In other words, what she meant was, “It’s scary, so please go with me.”

Behind them, Hamilton nodded with a pale face. They were scared silly, and then there was supposed to be an aftershock on top of that. It could not be helped that none of them wanted to leave Itami and the other JSDF troopers. The maids were nodding behind them, and the guards formed a human wall behind Itami, suggesting that they did not want him to leave.

And so, Piña brought her guards, the maids, Itami, and the others into the Imperial Palace.

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The palace which Piña led them into was plunged into chaos.

One could see various items and furniture tumbled to the floor.

Not only had the bureaucrats not rectified this matter, but they were sobbing in the corner, while the Praetorian guards were standing aside in a stupor. Others were prostrate on the ground, praying to the gods to save them.

Naturally, neither Piña nor Sugawara were questioned. Neither did anyone try to impede them as they proudly strolled through the passageway.

As she saw the sad state the palace had been reduced to, Piña grabbed her head and ordered her guards to find the officials in charge of the court in order to gather them up for a briefing.

In any event, they needed to restore order to this chaos. For that, they needed to gather the people in charge.

“Hmm. The quality of the troops has dropped,” Piña sighed as she saw the soldiers frozen in just about every corner she cared to look.

She had experienced it firsthand, so she could understand their terror at a natural disaster they had never seen before. However, she was still disappointed by how disorganized the Praetorians were.

They had taken away a lot of officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from the Praetorians in order to reconstitute the legions. The soldiers who replaced them were poorly trained and inexperienced. The negative results of that approach were on display now.

And so, Piña and the others finally reached the Emperor’s bedchamber.

As they looked around, they found that shockingly enough, the Praetorians assigned to protect the bedchamber were gone. They must have fled or otherwise disappeared at some point. Piña suddenly felt the strength leave her body, and she took a deep breath to regain her spirits.

“Sugawara-dono. I will introduce all of you to the Emperor. Until then, could you keep quiet?”

Since this was a necessary part of courtly etiquette, Sugawara would obviously obey. After that, Piña let the maids open the door to the bedchamber.

“Oh? I believed the first one here would be Diabo or Zorzar. To think it would be you, Piña.”

The Emperor sat up on his bed, his face covered in cold sweat as he welcomed Piña.

It looked like he wanted to see which of his children would come first in this time of emergency.

Although he was slightly disappointed that reality did not match his predictions, now was not the time to be so relaxed.

“Your Majesty. Please prepare yourself.”

Piña ordered to maid to get the Emperor dressed. After that, she had her guards surrounding them for protection as she accompanied her father to the audience chamber.

The Emperor rose, although he still needed to hold onto Piña’s shoulder to move.

After entering the audience chamber, they saw that the civil and military officials gathered there all had panicky looks on their faces. Then they closed in on Piña and the Emperor to beg their aid.

Piña helped the Emperor onto his throne.

“Don’t panic. You lot, bring the ministers and the other officials in here.”

“Military officers, go get control of the troops and prepare for battle. Defend the Palace. Also, have the troops find the generals throughout the Capital and have them report to the Palace.”

As they heard Piña's voice, the various officials remembered their jobs and went into action. After emerging from a vortex of chaos, they all regained their discipline and began moving in the same direction.

Piña breathed a sigh of relief as the court finally resumed its normal functioning.

However, as she looked around carefully, she saw that the candle stands and other articles in the audience chamber lay scattered on the ground, and the shattered remains of the picture frames littered the ground.

She suppressed a gasp at the sight of the audience chamber's dismal state, and ordered the maids to tidy this place up.

Organizing the audience chamber should have been the job of the Emperor's most trusted advisors. Normally speaking, Piña and the maids would be forbidden from this room. What they did was in defiance of the court's rules. However, in this time of emergency, only she and the others could act normally, so it could not be helped.

At these occasions... no, it was precisely because of occasions like these that maintaining one's dignity was even more important. The panicking people could calm down after seeing the stern discipline of the audience chamber. In contrast, if the audience chamber remained a mess, it would only intensify the confusion in their hearts.

The first time she saw the chamber's luxurious decorations, she grumbled

that they were useless frippery, but now she saw the purpose of the grand display here. That was to say, without those decorations, the audience chamber itself would be useless frippery.

Until recently, Piña and her knight band respected practicality and looked down on the extravagance of the palace's furnishings. But after taking on the task of being the intermediary for the Empire's diplomatic relations with Japan, she finally understood their purpose.

"Piña, you seem to have shed a layer of skin."

However, Piña did not understand the hidden meaning in the Emperor's words, and replied, "My skin is in place, and it is undamaged."

And then, the Emperor's serious facade crumbled.

"Piña, for a while now, there's been a group of unfamiliar people by your side. Since there is some time before the generals gather, why don't you introduce them?"

Piña nodded, and then slightly lowered a voice. Then she opened her hand and indicated Sugawara like she was slashing at him.

"Allow me to introduce the ambassador from the land of Japan, Sugawara-dono."

Sugawara took a step toward the Emperor with his chest held high, then lowered his head in respect. Behind him, Itami and the others saluted in time with Sugawara. The way they did things was slightly different from the usual

courtly etiquette.

“The land of Japan? I see, so you have accepted the role of a mediator between our Empire and their country. But why have you brought them here at this time? They have come all this way, but we have not yet welcomed them properly.

“Forgive me, Father. But I heard they were knowledgeable about this earthquake, and they said there would be another quake. Therefore I kept them by my side to benefit from their advice.”

Those words made Piña’s father blanch.

“You, you said there will be another shaking of the earth?”

“Indeed, which was why I asked them to come with us.”

The Emperor wiped off the sweat that suddenly beaded on his nose with his pajama sleeve.

“Very well. Ambassador-dono, I bid you welcome.”

Sugawara, who had been introduced at last, spoke the words he had been rehearsing in his mind.

“Thank you very much. I pray your Majesty will be in good spirits.”

“How could I be in good spirits after this cataclysm? However, it would seem it has also let me see how my daughter has grown. I must thank you for that.”

“No, your Majesty. All this was the result of her Highness’ training and refinement.”

“I always thought she was just playing war games.”

“Her Highness has long graduated from games! If her Highness were to go to war now, I am certain she would be an excellent commander!”

The sudden interruption came from Hamilton.

Right after that, Hamilton realized that she had rudely interrupted a conversation between the Emperor and a foreign ambassador, so she blushed and tried to make herself as small as possible. However, Sugawara and the Emperor ignored her. If they did not, they would have to censure her for her rudeness.

“Ambassador-dono. Regretfully, we are busy at the moment. At any other time we would have prepared a great feast for you. Forgive our poor hospitality tonight.”

“Yes, your Majesty. There will be many other opportunities to discuss the future of our nations.”

Sugawara bowed once more and then retreated behind Piña. He had said what he wanted to say. However, the Emperor spoke once more to Sugawara.

“Speaking of which, does your country of Japan have a king?”

This question was asked to ascertain what exactly Sugawara knew about the Empire. Much like how Japan was gathering information on the Empire, so too was the Empire gathering information on Japan.

But how had he done it? Suddenly, the questions welled up in his mind.

“No. Our country is not ruled by a king, but by an Emperor, although it is largely a symbolic position.”

“A figurehead position, you say? It is hard to imagine a country where the ministers stealing power from their ruler can be a strong one. The world beyond the Gate is indeed alien. Then again, there should be a person who rules you in that world, am I correct? Until this day, I have not met an equal to myself, so I am unsure of how to proceed. I pray you will forgive me for any accidental rudeness in communication.”

Just as he was speaking, a great sound came from the hallway behind them.

“Father, Father, are you alright?!”

Zorzel charged into the audience chamber like a wild horse.

His lackeys had their breastplates on backwards and their sandals on the wrong foot, and some of them had their scabbards but no swords. They were clearly in a panic.

Zorzel had a chain in hand, and the other side was linked to a whole mess of collars, which were locked around the neck of Tyuule and some other women. The white Warrior Bunny Tyuule had been dragged naked all the

way here from her bed, and there was a bitter expression on her face. Beside her were other girls, with black, blonde and red hair, and their bodies were covered in abrasions from how they were dragged here in the nude. Their condition seemed quite serious.

As Itami, Tomita and Kuribayashi saw this, they were shocked speechless.

Sugawara the diplomat remained impassive, but one could hear him clicking his tongue softly.

“Father, are you hurt? Good, let’s flee together!”

“Where will we run to?”

“In any case, we need to get out of here.”

Piña turned to her elder brother, who was harassing the Emperor, and said, “Ani-ue, just now, I ordered the generals to report to the Palace. If we leave now and the officials return to find nobody here, the palace will be thrown into chaos.”

However, Zorral replied, “We don’t have time for that! Noriko already said there might be a second or third shock, so we must leave here immediately!”

If this went on, it might be seen as the Emperor abandoning his throne.

Piña thought, *no matter what, I need to calm Ani-ue down.* So she started to think of a topic that might get his attention, and then she spoke to him again, with a tone to soothe him.

“Ani-ue, I was not aware that you knew about the aftershocks. Even I only just learned of them from these people.”

“I told you didn’t I? Noriko said so.”

“And who is this Noriko?”

As Piña asked her question, Zorzar yanked the chain leading to one of the collars

“Ah!” Tyuule and the other women cried out.

“It’s this black-haired girl, I caught her from the other side of the Gate.”

Zorzar indicated her with his chin. But at this moment—

“You son of a bitch! I’ll fucking kill you!”

Itami threw a lightning-fast punch that connected with Zorzar’s chin.



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“You son of a bitch! I’ll fucking kill you!”

Itami threw a lightning-fast punch that connected with Zorzal’s chin.

It rocked him back on his heels, and the tall man fell flat on his ass, cupping his chin as he cursed loudly. “You hit me, you bastard! You dare strike me, the first prince of the Empire?!” he snarled as he glared at Itami.

Itami was being Itami and rubbed his right fist. “Ow ow! Why’s his face so hard? I’m not cut out for this at all,” he whimpered as a tear leaked out from the corner of his eye.

“You fools! To think you actually raised your hand against his Highness! Your families will be exterminated for this!”

Zorzal’s flunkies drew their swords.

Normally, simply drawing a weapon in front of the Emperor in court was a grave offense, to say nothing of actually offering violence to a member of the Imperial family. However, the court was currently paralyzed in the wake of the earthquake. The Praetorians who should have defended the Emperor and his household were missing. Since there was nobody to maintain order, the area before the throne was a sea of chaos.

Tomita, watching from the side, flicked his Type 64’s fire selector to L (automatic fire), while Kuribayashi inspected Tyuule and the black-haired

girl on the ground.

“Are you alright?”

As she heard someone speak in her native Japanese, the black-haired girl raised her head in surprise.

“We’re from the JSDF. Are you Japanese?”

When the girl heard those words, her tears fell like a waterfall, and then she clutched Kuribayashi’s hands. *She must have suffered a lot*, Kuribayashi thought, and that thought filled her with strength. She took out her survival knife and cut the girl’s collar off her before throwing the severed leather away.

“Did you come to rescue me?”

“Yeah. We’ll bring you home.”

In truth, the JSDF did not know girls like this had been captured by the enemy, so technically speaking, Kuribayashi was lying. However, once they knew there were Japanese citizens suffering here, they could not possibly abandon them. They would definitely rescue them. Itami and his team were of one mind, and they prepared for battle. If anyone tried to stop them, they would be blown away. They each prepared themselves for what might be a gruelling fight.

On another side, Sugawara sighed as he realized his efforts up till now might be about to go up in smoke. But when he saw that a Japanese girl had been

kidnapped and subjected to such brutality, he could not suppress his anger either. He smiled bitterly to the Emperor, and then asked him a question in a tone that sounded polite, but was filled with mockery.

“I believed the prince-dono mentioned that he captured her from the other side of the Gate. What is this, your Majesty? And Piña-dono, did you know about this from the start?”

“Su-Sugawara-dono?”

Piña did not understand why Itami and Sugawara were doing this. That said, she had a rough idea of what was going on. It must be the way they treated their captives, because she knew the Japanese placed great value on human life.

Even so, she did not think it was enough to jeopardize the status of the talks between Japan and the Empire. They should have been able to separate their personal feelings from the benefit of the nation.

However, Itami now had his sidearm trained on Zorzar, a member of the Imperial family. This was something she could not cover up. No, right now, even Piña might be in danger because of his actions.

She knew well the power of guns, and she thought that if anything happened, she would have to protect the Emperor with her own body and fall before the throne. She decided to try talking him down before a bloodbath began.

“Itami-dono! Please stop at once! Everyone, please stay your blades. For my

sake, stand down!"

However, Zorzar's flunkies still had their weapons ready, and they were spreading out to encircle the group. There were 15 of them in total, and to them, they had the advantage in numbers. As such, they did not think too much about the situation. After all, all they had to do was kill all the enemy in order to win.

Zorzar laughed from where he was on the ground, as he imagined the man who struck him being cut to pieces.

"You barbarian scum, you've just sealed the fate of your homeland! We will exterminate everyone in your country! Everyone from your king to his people will die! Your lands will be nothing but ash! This is all your fault! Reflect on your sins as you die in agony!"

Itami's reply was "Kuribayashi, Tomita. Ignore him. Fire at will."

Kuribayashi drew her bayonet from her waist and fixed it onto her rifle. Then she flicked her own fire selector to AUTO before stepping forward.

"Don't break your gun again."

Kuribayashi simply grinned in response to Tomita.

The dancer: Kuribayashi. Her partners: Itami and Tomita. The *pas de mort* was about to begin.

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Bayonet fighting (not to be confused with jukendo) was a combat art that was still in use in the present day.

Much like how aircraft cannon were still useful in the age of guided missiles, bayonet fighting was a core part of the infantry combat curriculum. It was essential in melee combat, and could not be allowed to waste away.

In the Falklands War in South America, and the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, bayonet charges were crucial to finishing off their foe.

In addition, unlike kendo, which was more of a sport, bayonet fighting was practiced for actual combat. It was a skill which was designed for war.

Even in the world of martial arts, where possessing a weapon would put one many levels above unarmed opposition, bayonet fighting was exceptionally useful against other martial arts like karate and judo, regardless of how skilled the practitioners of the latter two were. This was because if a bayonet fighter's opponent was skilled in close combat, the bayonet fighter could just back off and fire their rifle. This was not being unfair — it was war, and it was different from judged contests.

The Type 64 rifle weighed 4.3 kilograms unloaded. Kuribayashi used it as a bludgeoning weapon even as she slashed and stabbed with the razor sharp bayonet, before deflecting a sword swing with the body of her weapon.

They could not keep up with her nimble body and graceful movements. Not to mention, the soldiers of this world were used to advancing in a shield wall,

so they were hard-pressed to engage Kuribayashi, who was leaping all over the place.

Their main battle tactic was to charge into contact with the enemy, bash with their shields, and slash with their swords.

However, Kuribayashi did not charge them.

She shot the enemies with shields, swiftly evaded their incoming swords, and then thrust her bayonet into her opponent's armpits and into their hearts. If they got too close, she bashed them with the butt of her rifle and slashed their carotid arteries while they were stunned.

It did not matter how strong a warrior was or how fine his blade if he could not hit his enemy. Zorzar's flunkies prided themselves on their brute strength and trained themselves intensively for that purpose, but Kuribayashi mocked them as they flailed uselessly at her. The only way they could fight her was by overwhelming her with the weight of their numbers.

However, Kuribayashi was covered by Tomita.

As an enemy began to circle behind her, Tomita coldly pulled the trigger. A 7.62mm round was powerful enough to penetrate 10 cm of steel plate. When it hit a man, it pierced the thin metal of his breastplate and began mushrooming by the time it entered the body. Then, it tumbled end over end as it moved, ripping up his internal organs before exiting through his back.

As they saw their comrade fall after a single shot, Zorzar's cronies gave up

their plan of flanking Kuribayashi.

And then, in front of them was an unfettered beast.

Kuribayashi licked her lips after making her eighth corpse and sneered, “Who’s next?” as she eyed Zorzar’s lackeys. However, none of them dared take a step forward.

“Well, if you’re giving up, throw down your arms!”

Zorzar’s lackeys threw down their weapons as one.

Kuribayashi seemed very pleased with this display. She then nodded and said, “Very good,” before ordering them out of the audience chamber.

The lackeys were confused for a moment, and they looked to their master, Zorzar. However, as they saw Kuribayashi pulling back her rifle’s bolt, they scattered amidst a clattering of metal.

Zorzar’s eyes were wide in disbelief as he looked on the slaughter in front of him and at the sight of his fleeing cronies.

His body was shuddering uncontrollably as Itami levelled a mysterious weapon at him. Would it spit fire like the thing that killed his flunkies? Would it spit fire and turn him into a corpse like the one beside him? Was he going to die? Why, why was all this happening to him?

He was the first prince. He should not be subject to this unreasonable treatment.

He was the future Emperor of the Empire. Nobody should have dared do this to him.

And then, Itami looked down the sights of his gun at Zorzar, and spoke.

“All right, first prince-dono. As you were saying, this girl was one of the people you captured from the Gate. That means you must have more prisoners, right?”

“Hmph! I have no need to answer disrespectful questions asked by disrespectful men!”

Zorzar said that in an effort to restore the tattered shreds of his dignity. If this man knelt down before him and apologized, then respectfully begged a favor of him, perhaps Zorzar might find it in himself to show his largesse. If not, then there was nothing to say. He could go ahead and kill Zorzar if he wanted. But if he did that, then the man could forget about hearing the answer. Zorzar and the knowledge he had was his own hostage

In the end, Itami smiled bitterly and called out to his subordinates.

“Kuribayashi. *Make him talk.*”

“Roger, el-tee~♪”

This was the first time Kuribayashi had been so happy to obey an order given by Itami.

The following scene is somewhat violent, and we need to adhere to the age limitations on this publication. Thus we will describe the scene with sound alone.

*Pachi, gucha, dosun, gan, ban, goh, dosu, gucha...boki*, something like that.

And of course, Zorzar was screaming all this while.

“Stop! Wait, stop! Stooooop! Ahhhh it hurts! Guheee! Abbah! Gwaaaaargh!  
No, don’t break my finger, let me g-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Unable to bear this sight, Piña and the Emperor looked away.

Of course, they had thought of stopping her, but they were worried that if they spoke out, Itami and the others would turn their anger on them instead.

Piña was grateful for her experience in Italica. After all, this was the first time a member of the Imperial family had been in such grave danger.

Hamilton and the maids were hugging each other as they stood by the wall. They were trembling as though the earthquake had come again.

This gruesome scene finally came to an end when the door to the audience chamber opened,

The ministers, generals and those Praetorians who had regained their discipline were all led here by Count Marx. However, as they saw what was before the throne, they froze.

The first thing they saw were scattered corpses, followed by Zorzar, who looked like he had been applying blood to himself as makeup.

Zorzar's broken teeth were scattered all over the floor, along with what looked like molars. Blood streamed from his mouth and nose. Everyone who saw him was frightened.

Itami glanced at the soldiers who had just arrived, then trained his gun on Zorzar once more, like a kid about to squash a bug.

"Well, your Highness the First Prince. I believe you can answer my question now."

Zorzar did not reply. However, that was because he was too dazed to understand Itami's question. Itami then decided to pull him up by the lapels to get his attention.

However, at this moment, Tyuule interposed herself between the two of them, throwing her arms open in a protective gesture.

After seeing that body covered in cuts and bruises, Itami winced in sympathetic pain before he could appreciate her beauty. Her injuries were probably from being dragged around.

"Please do not harm the Prince."

She was covered in wounds caused by this man, and yet she was protecting her tormentor. Her strong spirit gave Itami pause.

Her state of mind might have been similar to children who were abused by their parents. Or it might have been a form of Stockholm Syndrome, where captives empathized with their captors.

In deference to her will, Itami lowered his gun. But he was still frustrated, and he poured that frustration into his next words.

“Your Highness. I believe you mentioned earlier than this woman was one of the people you captured from the other side of the Gate. That means you must have other people in captivity, am I correct?

Zorzar could not speak because of the immense pain, and could only nod weakly as he whimpered in agony. Then, he scabbled behind Tyuule. It was a disgraceful sight.

“Hiroki! What happened to Hiroki?” the girl called Noriko wailed from behind Kuribayashi. It seemed like they had been kidnapped together, so there had to be at least one more person here.

“The man was sent to the slave markets. I don’t know what happened after that.”

Zorzar spat out blood as he answered, then fainted from overexertion.

Sugawara faced the Emperor, seated behind Piña.

“Your Majesty. I hope you will reserve your welcome for after you return the captured citizens of our country to us. I do not know what gods you worship, but you had better pray to them for the lives of our people. Princess Piña, I

will leave the matter of finding these people to you. I look forward to your answer.”

After saying that, Sugawara exchanged glances with Itami, and then made to leave this place.

However —

“Stop right there, barbarian scum!”

If they permitted this sort of violence against their leaders, the Empire would be utterly disgraced. Under the command of one of the generals, the Praetorians drew their swords. It looked like there would be another battle here tonight.

“Hold!”

However, the Emperor’s voice kept them from moving. This was because the Emperor was fully aware that fighting the JSDF would only add more corpses to those already on the ground.

“Sugawara-dono. I admit the army of Japan is powerful. However, being strong in battle does not equate to victory in warfare. Your nation has a grievous weakness.”

“And what weakness would that be?”

“Your country loves its people; far too much, perhaps. Excessive righteousness makes you predictable. Excessive trust leads to massive losses.

When the enemy is strong, one should not fight them. The tip of the sword is very sharp, but the hilt of the sword is its weakness. If the edge is sharp, then all one needs to do is break it. Even a so-called invincible foe cannot hope to escape unscathed when they are exhausted and fleeing for their lives. Once a country's national power is depleted, no matter how civilized or advanced they are, that country will be destroyed by barbarians. That is a fact which has played out before in history.”

Sugawara replied, “Indeed, our country does have this weakness. Our JSDF trains to defend our country. Do you wish to test their conviction?”

“What’s this, do you intend to fight to the end? Have the negotiations not started already?”

“Your Majesty, I am fully aware that peace is merely the preparation time for the next war. That being said, peace talks are no reason to stop preparing for war. My country, indeed, my entire world has moved beyond the Empire’s mindset after centuries of bloodsoaked history. I hope this Imperial Capital will not vanish during the course of the peace talks.”

He seemed to be hinting that a certain nation was trying to drag out the peace talks to buy time.

Sugawara’s words were a threat. Even though they had ceased all combat operations during this ceasefire, if Japan put their minds to it, they could resume hostilities at a moment’s notice. And this time the battlefield would be the Imperial Capital.

The Emperor clicked his tongue quietly, and spoke.

“You say that, but isn’t that the same as rejecting the upcoming peace?”

“Indeed it is. So please be prepared for the dreadful consequences that will result if you lie.”

“Oh, all right, I believe you. It’s only natural to believe in one’s country. But do you think you can make it through intact?”

As the Emperor was saying that, the aftershock struck.

The earth shook once again, and flakes of paint from the cracked ceiling fell like dust.

The Emperor went pale from fear, while the generals, ministers and Praetorians fell to their knees as they clung desperately to the walls.

“All right, let’s go!”

Leaving these pathetic faces behind him, Itami proudly led his people, Sugawara and the girl called Noriko past the trembling Praetorians, and left the audience chamber.

At the group’s head were Sugawara and Itami, followed by Kuribayashi and the kidnapped Noriko, with Tomita bringing up the rear. Itami offered Noriko his uniform coat to cover up her nakedness.

Everybody was silent.

After ten to twenty minutes of walking, they exited the palace. As Itami sighed, he moaned, “Crap. My hand just moved by itself and I hit him.”

Sugawara nodded.

“Yes, that was a huge fuck-up. How are we going to report this?”

The rush of blood to their brains had subsided. Itami and Sugawara began worrying about what excuse they would give for this.

## **Chapter 8**



伊丹

柳田

“Dare I ask how your Majesty intends to address this unprecedented disgrace and destruction?”

The Senator who was also a patrician, Marquis Casel, directed these unsweetened words to Emperor Molt Sol Augustus, seated on his throne amidst the rubble of the Senate Building.

Once, this place was a darkened hall, but now it was an open-air amphitheater.

It was hard to tell if the drama being performed was a comedy or a tragedy. The bigger pieces of debris were already gone, so now it looked like either a modern art masterpiece, or a deranged amateur’s attempt at a theater backdrop. Either way, it resembled a waste heap.

A gentle wind ruffled the Senators’ togas.

Some of them sneezed as their noses were irritated, and powdery dust dirtied their sleeves.

The night was dark and full of terrors for them; they had been shaken out of bed and their sleep ruined by the earthquake, and then the aftershocks frightened them further. Even a dim light could slightly relieve their unease, but nobody could sleep before the sun came up again.

And so, after some time without sleep, the sky in the east began to brighten up. The Imperial Capital turned toward morning, and its people could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Just then, almost as if they had come with the sunrise, a great bang accompanied the first rays of dawn.

It was a thunderous report that felt like it would split the eardrums of anyone who heard it.

Two gigantic swords slashed across the sky, dumping four objects behind them. These four objects flew unerringly into the Senate Building, perched on one of the Imperial Capital's hills, and the sturdy structure was thus neatly demolished.

The Senate Building, the symbol of the Empire's power, was destroyed in an instant.

Of course, this was a precision bombing mission conducted by JSDF troops hidden in the capital with laser designators. However, the people who did not know this simply took it to be a show of the gods' wrath after the earthquake. Gripped by fear, the people began quietly circulating the rumor that the Emperor must have done something to offend the gods.

The intellectual elite of the Empire, the Senators, did not think it was the wrath of the gods, but a man-made phenomenon. Yet even that was only possible because of their positions.

That being said, the Senators were still crushed by the destruction of the building that symbolized their authority.

On the other hand, one had to consider that if this was not done by the gods, but by men, then one had to wonder how powerful these men were, who could reduce sturdy stone walls as thick as a grown man's outstretched arms into tumbled ruins.

The Senators' seats, sundry items, carved bas-reliefs, tributes from various countries, trophies, as well as the huge statues of divinity, all of them were now ruined fragments on the ground.

Everyone who thought about it could not help but shiver.

*What if the Senate had been in session when this occurred?*

*Or, what if the enemy used this power to conduct indiscriminate attacks on the Imperial Capital?*

Because the speaker's podium and the rings of seats were gone, the Senators had no choice but to sit on convenient stone chunks, or directly on the floor.

Some people even listened to Marquis Casel's words from a kneeling position.

"And another thing. All this was because our men captured some of the other world's residents to learn about them. When the enemy ambassador found out, he was very angry, and apparently, Crown Prince Zorzar was involved in this matter and brutally beaten before his Majesty's eyes. Have I gotten any part of that wrong?"

The Crown Prince in question sat beside the Emperor, his face swollen and moaning in pain.

The fact that he had been "brutally beaten" was evident to anyone with working eyes.

Although he looked like he had been savagely mauled by a group judging by these wounds, the Senators were shocked to hear that all this had been inflicted on him by a single female soldier.

People heard that the soldier was "female", and they assumed she was probably a Giant, Ogre or a Troll of some sort. But the truth was that she was merely human, and a petite-bodied woman at that. It was almost unbelievable that someone like her could beat Zorzar into his current state. Much like a squirrel defeating a bear, if word of this got out, Zorzar would be a laughingstock.

Therefore, Zorzar could not lend any truth to these rumors.

“These injuries were not caused by a person. I fell down the stairs during the earthquake.”

“Could all these have been caused by falling down the stairs?”

“They were long stairs, and I fell all the way down.”

Without his two front teeth, every word he spoke was accompanied by an annoying whistle, but he still tried to make excuses for himself.

If truth be told, once he admitted that he had been beaten up this badly by a girl, he would have nowhere to hide his face. When people said the name “Zorzar”, the meaning behind it would be “the guy who got his ass kicked by a girl”, so every time his name was mentioned, it would be like mocking him.

Of course, Zorzar could not allow that to happen. Otherwise, he would lose all his authority as the future Emperor. So he denied these events with all his strength. The events of the audience chamber would be painted as a battle against the Japanese ambassador, who was trying to save his people, while Zorzar was merely attempting to defend the slaves that he owned.

His desperate attempts to save face made Marquis Casel look scornfully at Zorzar. They had finally obtained a trump card in the form of violence against a member of the Imperial family, but because someone wanted to save their face, they could not play it. By protecting his personal interests while sacrificing the nation's well-being, Zorzar had only compounded his failure. More importantly, he was still too stupid to realise his mistake. It was almost laughable.

"I heard that the enemy ambassador visited Lord Cicero several times in order to speak with the Empire. As such, ample preparations were made, and there were several meetings. Truthfully speaking, I was also introduced to him, and plans were made for a meeting in the near future.

But what happened here? Why would they get so angry over a mere woman slave? It was not as though she was a member of royalty. Does anyone know what they are thinking? If so, please explain in detail."

Everyone looked at the ground after hearing Casel's question.

Nobody here knew the full picture. Lord Cicero and Marquis Ducie understood the nature of the Japanese emissaries, to an extent. But they did not know what had caused last night's outburst.

As the man in charge of the proceedings, Count Marx was quite well informed. Yet even he knew nothing about Japan or its emissaries.

The name of Piña, who knew both sides, was mentioned.

And then, Piña was summoned to address the Senate for the first time in her life.

Piña stood nervously under the weight of 300 pairs of eyes. Those eyes seemed to be judging her.

She was worrying about how to atone for the sin of bringing soldiers of the enemy to the Emperor, but the Senate did not bring it up. Instead, they asked Piña to share what she knew about the country of Japan and its people.

“I, I wish permission to address the Senate and speak of what I know.”

The Speaker for the Senate nodded, giving her permission to speak.

Piña coughed twice and then started from the beginning, or when she had first met the JSDF.

“I first met them at Italica.”

And as she spoke, the politicians slowly realized the kind of people they were at war with.

The enemy's weapons could strike from further away than a bow could, and they slaughtered soldiers with overwhelming power. And then they even attached blades to them. In the face of these weapons, the Imperial soldiers were destroyed where they made contact with the JSDF.

This also illustrated the reasons behind the defeat of the Imperial and the Coalition Armies.

Quite a number of Senators began growing suspicious as Piña narrated her fanciful tale. However, Cicero, Marquis DUCIE, and the other Senators who had attended the garden party knew that what she spoke was the truth. After all they had fired those very weapons personally, and they could allay their fellow Senators' suspicions.

Piña continued speaking. She spoke of the hellish scene when the JSDF's iron pegasi exterminated the bandits squirming below them like vermin.

Sitting as they were inside the carcass of the Senate Building, they could not bring themselves to doubt her tale.

"The enemy is a country called Japan. They are come from beyond the Gate, from a land that surpasses the Empire in every way, in a world made of sky-scraping towers. These towers stretch as far as the eye can see, and they extend up to the heavens. The dark depths of the earth, where we bury our

dead, are brightly lit streets in their world, and people live there. Their society is orderly and clean, while filled with art and ample literature.”

And then, Piña mentioned the list of prisoners of war which the Japanese government had given her when she had accepted the position of intermediary.

“Forgive me from keeping this from you until now, but this book lists the names of all the captives taken by Japan that are still alive.”

The Senators immediately fought over the book which Piña brought out.

“You see, Norris! It’s your son’s name!!”

“Derkins’ name is here too. Did you say all these people are still alive? Piñadono? Is it true that they’re all alive?”

“My son is still alive! This is wonderful!”

The Senate Building resounded with joyful cries. But at the same time, there were those who could not find their kin, and fell back into despair. These alternating scenes of joy and sorrow threw the Senate into chaos.

“The people in this book are now prisoners of Japan. Part of the payment of taking the job of mediator is the right to select ten or so people from that list

to be unconditionally returned to the Empire. Naturally, I chose the family of Lord Cicero and Lord Dacie, due to assistance rendered in the facilitation of negotiations.”

“That’s too unfair, your Highness! What about the rest of us? Must we impotently gnaw our nails?”

It was only natural that those people whose relatives were not picked by Piña would feel that way. However, she wanted to offer an inducement to people to begin the peace talks quickly, so she had to give priority to the cooperative Senators.

Of course, if she actually said that, the Senate, filled with pro-war Senators, would break out into interference and all sorts of attacks. As a result, in order to ensure the success of the negotiations, she had to carefully pick and choose her allies, and everyone present understood that. Also, if the talks went successfully, they could also negotiate for the release of other prisoners. So in that sense, Piña’s choices were only to be expected.

However, now that the situation was at this stage, there was a need to discuss how to get back the rest of the captives. But how much ransom money would they require for that?

“The representatives from Japan have said that their country does not practice ransoming of captives. They will also guarantee the safety of the prisoners whether or not a ransom is paid. If the Empire has any prisoners from Japan,

they will arrange for a mutual exchange. If not, then something can be worked out in future negotiations.”

“They don’t practice slavery? They don’t take ransoms?”

“Hmph, well, if they’re going to work something out in future negotiations, that’s as good as a ransom, right? Our people would make good leverage in those deals.”

“That being said, it’s a mercy that they won’t be sold as slaves. We need to free them quickly!”

After the Senators finished speaking, Piña continued.

“I feel I know why the ambassador of Japan was so wrathful.”

The Senators urged her to elaborate.

“Their country did not take our patrician sons and brothers as slaves, and they were treated well as captives. They do not do this for any particular gain, but because it is their nature. I feel this is what his Majesty saw, their love for their people. If they knew of the mistreatment of their own people as slaves... well, I trust you know what happens if you snatch away a griffin’s cub?”

Piña opened her arms to emphasize her point.

They were surrounded by the remains of the Senate Building. The walls and pillars were pulverized and tumbled, and debris lay everywhere. The ceiling was blown clean off, and they could see the clouds floating by overhead.

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Without a place in the Senate, Zorzar quietly retreated from the building. Before long, he was back in his own room.

His face was covered in bruises, and it was not just his lips that were swollen. There were lumps everywhere on his body and marks where he had been beaten. His swollen lips and missing teeth made him wheeze with every breath, which deprived his voice of its authority.

He was the picture of a defeated soldier.

As he passed through the door, he ran out of strength and collapsed. His slaves and subordinates hurriedly lifted him up.

Without wasting a word, Tyuule lent him her shoulder, and helped lower him onto the bed. She cooled his body and face with rare and precious ice cubes.

“It looks like the peace lovers are going to make up a majority of the Senate. The problem is that they’ll end up surrendering unconditionally through the negotiations. We need to do something... a military victory sounds good,

don't you think?"

The speaker was a young man standing on the balcony. He was watching Zorzar being carried to his bed.

When he noticed, Zorzar turned his swollen face to look at him. At a glance, the young man looked to be of patrician stock. Instead of Zorzar's brutality, he had an air of refinement about him and an intelligent look in his eyes.

"Diabo."

"Ani-sama. Well, you're a sorry sight. Don't push yourself too hard."

The young man called Diabo entered Zorzar's bedroom and looked at his older brother's face as he lay on the bed.

"Hmph. Showoff."

"I could say the same."

Zorzar tapped his swollen face and said, "This was my doing."

"I do envy that naive mindset of yours. I honestly can't imagine how someone as proud as you is still alive. Father did kill the man who was our

elder cousin, you know.”

“Father was young then. That’s why he took in the orphan of the previous Emperor. But now, Father’s getting on in years. He should be thinking about a successor now, and we’re the ones who carry his blood.”

“So you were planning to take the throne while I was playing the fool?”

“Ani-sama, it was because of your idiot act in front of Father that I could freely take action. I must thank you for that.”

Because of that, he had a chance of taking the throne. However, Zorzał pointed at the shrugging Diabo, and indicating his naivete.

“The one who will be the next Emperor is not you, but me.”

Diabo could not imagine his older brother as “Your Majesty”. It felt like talking to someone else.

“And what of it? Ani-sama, do you have a way to hold on to the throne? I don’t think so.”

“Is that why you think you can easily gain the throne? When this war ends, the Emperor will step down with it. But he won’t stop pulling strings once he

steps down. He'll give the throne to a know-nothing like me so he can play me like a puppet and hold the real power behind the country. That's probably what he was thinking. You showed too much of your talent. The Emperor already knows what you're up to."

Diabo's eyes went wide.

"But then, what'll happen if Father dies? It would be too irresponsible to leave the Empire to you."

"Oh ye of little faith. Do you really think I'm that useless?"

Hiding his fangs and claws in front of the Emperor for many years had been a difficult task. Zorzar was implying that a useless man could not do that much.

"Tyuule, where are the other people from Japan that we captured along with Noriko?"

Upon hearing the question, Tyuule bowed deeply, and switched to her soft, powerless expression, with a smile filled with wisdom and power.

"Yes. There are two more people. They were sold to the mines as slaves, and we know their location. The first one was called Nogami Hiroki, but regrettably he perished in a mineshaft collapse. The other one is called Matsui Fukui. She is currently alive and working in the same mine. If you order me,

I will immediately bring her back and protect her. What shall I do?”

“Bring her back right away. It was a good thing I didn’t sell Noriko off. Well, it was largely due to my interest in her anyway, but if I’d known earlier, perhaps I should have been nicer to her?”

Zorzar managed to smile, despite his entire body being a mass of pain.

“No, my Prince, what you did was fine. After all, she was an unskilled woman. If you had sold her off, she would only have gone to a brothel to service countless men. It was an honor for her to receive the attentions of the next Emperor.”

Diabo watched from the side, unable to speak, his mouth hanging open in shock.

He had hidden his claws until now. Could it be that they would only be allowed to shine for such a short time before the situation was decided? Indeed, the Emperor would probably be made to step down after the peace talks started, but the Senate would not accept Zorzar as the successor, right?

“Ah, so that’s the objective of the people of Japan. They want Zorzar to find the slaves before making their entrance... we were tricked!”

Enslaving captives was a common practice in the Empire. Denying that

aspect of life would be very foolish. If they managed to find a captive and successfully return them to Japan, it would be a success for the pro-peace faction. Now that the pro-peace faction composed a majority of the Senate, this might well be the shortest way to the throne.

“Since the Emperor has decided to vacate his seat during the talks, now should be the time to consider his successors. From the way Piña grew unexpectedly, she’s also an enemy. Although she’s far too close to those Japan people... ah, well. Dealing with Japan will be important in the future, might as well let her handle that.”

“Then, Ani-sama, what about this war? If this goes on, the talks will end up being a surrender...”

“What’s to be scared about the enemy? They destroyed the Senate Building, but they did it at dawn when nobody was around. If we can’t beat them in a fair fight, then we’ll just have to fight unfairly. The Emperor was probably thinking about that much. Diabo, you should stop trying to challenge me and think about which side you want to stand on.”

After Zorzar finished, he called Tyuule to his bed and ordered Diabo away. He blinked as he realised there was nobody around him. Zorzar’s subordinates and women had already left.

“Then, your Highness, please take care of your body.”

“Like you care... though I wish I could forget about this pain...”

“Your Highness, that can’t be helped, ah...”

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The large transport helicopter, a CH-47A Chinook, returned to Arnus Hill.

Mochizuki Noriko looked outside from the viewports on the helicopter, and her chest tightened.

After leaving the Imperial Capital, the scenery had changed from orchards and farmland, to pasture and barren wastes, or sometimes a sea of trees, and then in the distance she could see an airport in the distance, along with a group of concrete buildings surrounded by a six-pointed star fort.

That place felt like Japan.

“I’m home...”

She was so moved that the tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

Since last night, she had cried several times. Of course, she was worried

about her lover Hiroki, but at the same time, she was happy to be able to return home. She believed that the JSDF who rescued her would also be able to rescue her lover.

She wanted to meet her parents as soon as possible.

Seated on both sides of Noriko were Kurokawa and Kuribayashi, who had taken very good care of her. She was given clothes to wear, food to eat, beverages to drink, among other things. The feeling of chocolate and other familiar desserts in her mouth made her so nostalgic that she wept again.

Itami and the others did not ask her about her time in captivity. They would leave that aside for now, so Noriko could forget those painful days and rejoice that she could go home at last.

After receiving Sugawara and Itami's reports, General Hazama, the supreme commander of the Special Region Expeditionary Force, ordered them to return with the kidnapped person to Arnus immediately. In addition, he requested two F-4 Phantoms for a bombing mission to strike fear into the heart of the Emperor and his officials.

What this meant, of course, was "Bring her back right away". The method they chose was similar to how one would treat an animal or a child; upon discovering misconduct, immediately apply punishment and a scolding. Thus, as they pondered the lesson of a short, sharp blow to the Empire, they

considered potential targets.

The Defense Minister approved the airstrike, provided civilian casualties were kept to a minimum.

When Morita's cabinet called up Natsume from the Defence Ministry, the usual cold reply was, "Go ahead. But make sure you do it well and put on a good show."

After receiving Natsume's report, Prime Minister Morita furrowed his brows and said, "What a headache, but since he already did it, it can't be helped." His tone seemed brighter and fresher than just now.

The Chinook landed on a helipad in the depths of Arnus Garrison.

Kurokawa and Kuribayashi helped Noriko stand up, and took her to the medical facilities where the doctors were waiting for her. Arnus was equipped with a field treatment center for people injured during combat.

While Noriko was there, she went through a battery of tests; internal, external, reproductive, gynecological, psychological and many others. In addition, there were some interviews conducted in order not to increase her emotional burden, such as the circumstances under which she was abducted. She was also assigned a counselor who was experienced with helping victims of crime to help her get over her emotional wounds.

After that, 3rd Recon moved a huge pile of cardboard boxes containing all sorts of specimens down from the Chinook.

As expected of the country that dominated the continent, the Imperial Capital contained items, trade goods and information from various other nations. Because of that, they had a good grasp on the Special Region's ores and where they were located.

The people of the Special Region did not know about rare earths, so the JSDF had to prospect for it themselves. The people of the Special Region only knew of iron, tin, lead, gold, silver, copper, platinum and other related metal deposits. To investigate further, they obtained samples of the ground from traders at their target location. In addition, there were rumors of something strange that burned as it flowed, so in future negotiations with the Empire's government, requests for the right to extract these resources would be a very important topic.

On another front, someone had made a DVD containing videos of the various species and races found in the melting pot of the Black Streets. Most of these were made by Sergeant Sasagawa, whose hobby was filming, while the rest were made by other members of the team, who seemed to like filming the ladies more often than not. That aside, there were also many species and demihumans in their native clothing, which were all collected as material.

They compared this information with reports made by the captured soldiers from the Ginza Incident, as well as with reports from the farmers and traders encountered around Arnus.

1st Recon and 5th Recon did some information-gathering of their own. They mainly recorded information on the plants surrounding the Imperial Capital and took extensive samples of seeds and leaves, as well as insects, animal spores and the soil.

In contrast, under Itami's influence, 3rd Recon mainly took pictures of the demihumans' practices and culture (done by Sasagawa) or the various foods from the region (done by Furuta). All these things were hot topics on the television and the weekly magazines.

Of particular note was the fact that media interest in the residents of the Special Region (especially the female ones) had skyrocketed ever since the testimonial in front of the National Diet. The TV stations and newspapers submitted an endless stream of requests to conduct their activities in the special region, and they kept ambushing the responsible parties day and night, to the point where said parties wanted to go on strike. In order to ease this pressure, the Ministry of Defense permitted a small dissemination of the information Itami and his team had collected.

They made the headlines in photography magazines, under the title of "Girls of the Special Region".

It contained numerous pictures of the Special Region's black Goth girl, the blonde-haired elf girl, the silver-haired magical girl, the cat-eared PX shop attendant, the tavern's bunny-eared poster girl, among many others. It soon became a big hit in the Akihabara shops.

In other words, these were all important data. Itami was doing final checks on the material before sending it out when Yanagida walked over.

“Yo, Itami, you’re back. What did you do this time?”

Although he wanted to say something, Itami ended up clicking his tongue and grabbing his head. No matter how he tried to phrase it, he had thoughtlessly instigated an incident in front of the enemy’s leader. There was no way this would not be seen as a problem.

A more concrete example would be to imagine a summit meeting convened by a general of the northern half of a certain peninsula. Halfway through, the Prime Minister’s bodyguard suddenly whips out a gun and points it at the general’s son while demanding, “Return the people you kidnapped”. While acting out like that might relieve some stress, it would be a diplomatic disaster with the other party’s trust in them shaken. This did not take into consideration the disastrous effects of beating the Emperor’s firstborn son half to death.

“I’m the one who wants to grab my head. Your situation is pretty amusing. Well, no matter what happened, you still managed to successfully rescue one of our kidnapped people. Frankly speaking, I’m not sure whether to punish you or praise you.”

“Then, what’s going to happen?”

“40% pay cut. However, the government is going to make a big deal about the fact that you rescued someone. This way, Cabinet support for us should go up a bit more. Because of that, the brass ruled that you shouldn’t be punished too heavily.”

“How about General Hazama?”

“Same old sour face as always.”

Itami turned to face in Hazama’s general direction before putting his hands together and saying, “Sorry for the trouble”. As usual, he looked like a man who was not worried about himself. To Itami, who had no ambitions for glory, being allowed to keep his job was a godsend.

“Don’t tell me, you want me to make a public appearance?”

In truth, that was why Yanagida had come looking for Itami. Be it cutting his pay or other things, there were a lot of things he wanted to scold him about.

However, Yanagida waved both his hands in denial.

“Well, it’s too late for today. The brass is tearing their hair out over how to handle this kidnapping thing. The fact is, we couldn’t contact her family, though we managed to get her records from the police. After that, we learned her entire family went to Ginza to distribute “Have you seen my daughter” leaflets... They did so during that fateful day too.”

That was the day when Itami was headed for the Summer Comiket, when he was waiting for the Yurikamome line. On that day, at that time, Ginza was painted bright red with blood. A lot of people died then. The number of people Itami managed to save back then was far too few compared to the number of victims.

“Seriously?” Itami whined.

“We’re keeping it a secret from her for now. At the very least, we’ll wait until the doctors and experts rate her as ready before we tell her. I came to help prepare 4th Recon for their expedition to the Imperial Capital and to send them off. Looks like it’s about time. Also, I was wondering whether to tell you about the current conditions in person, or through a report. But standing around and talking isn’t good either. Meet me at Arnus Town later for a drink.”

Itami concealed his distaste at being invited out by Yanagida. *Why do I have*

*to go with you, he thought.*

Rather than staring at Yanagida's sinister face, he would much rather be drinking with Rory or Tuka (Lelei was still underage in Japan, so she could only order the food there). Well, them or Delilah, the Warrior Bunny poster girl. Kurata and Tomita were fine too.

"Ah, don't give me that look. I've got a lot of interesting things to talk about too. Meet me at 1900."

However, it would probably be better not to think about pointless things, since he was booked by Yanagida. He did not seem like the sort to be put off by distasteful facial expressions and evasive attitudes. That being the case, he should accept Yanagida's treat. Itami could stomach that better.

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Kurokawa and Kuribayashi stayed close to the kidnappee, Mochizuki Noriko. Their things were left by the side of the helicopter. The other team members busied themselves with tidying things up, carrying luggage, preparing their weapons for return to the armoury, sorting out their personal items and so on. Although Itami was the commander, he felt bad about telling Kurokawa and Kuribayashi to take their things.

And so, in the end he persuaded Sergeant Major Kuwabara to move them

with him.

The first thing to do was to get to the medical facility, and they walked all the way there carrying the girls' heavy bags. Finally, they reached a concrete building which looked like a prison. It had 300 beds, in preparation for large-scale battle casualties, as well as a procedure room, an operating theatre, and 20 separate treatment areas for patients in critical condition.

However, they had no patients so far. After all, there was no fighting going on, and the JSDF people did not get themselves hurt.

Because it was just too boring, the nurses and doctors assigned there at the start returned to their respective treatment centers and continued their regular duties.

If there were an unexpected number of casualties which were beyond the abilities of the eight resident doctors to handle, then they would recruit more people to help. This was only possible because the Gate opened out to Ginza.

And so, less than ten of the beds were in use. Currently there were four patients in residence.

Unlucky servicemen who were hurt during training, who banged their heads, cut their fingers, caught a cold, or got a stomachache from drinking the Special Region's water, almost none of them needed a treatment center stay.

In contrast, the people who needed to stay in the treatment center for critical wounds were all from the Special Region.

The people currently in the treatment center included one of the apprentices working on a construction site at Arnus, who suffered a head injury from his master, as well as one of the mercenary guards hired by the ALC, who was injured in battle with a thief. Then, there was an old man on the verge of death, whom 4th Recon had found in a nearby nunnery.

At a glance, he looked to be around 60 to 70 years old. His left arm was severed near the shoulder, while his lower left leg was severed in the middle of the thigh. He was also suffering from sepsis, but he recovered quickly after antibiotics were administered. He was currently undergoing rehabilitation to get used to his prosthetic limbs. The problem was that he refused to say anything about himself besides his name. Because of that, he would have nowhere to go when he was discharged.

The doctors hypothesized that he might have been a senior commander in the Coalition Army. Given that he was in the protection of a nunnery, he might well have been a noble of some sort. He must have been keeping quiet because he was afraid he would be taken prisoner.

This was the air that hung over the nearly-empty treatment center.

Itami felt that seeing only one or two duty nurses filling in reports inside a gigantic nurse's office was a surreal sight. He asked one of the white-clad nurses where his subordinates were in this vast treatment center.

Then, he headed for Noriko's room. A big ward like hers would cost 10,000 yen a day if it were in a city hospital. Itami muttered, "What's the point of making the rooms so big?" as he walked down the long hallway.

He might cause trouble if he just barged into a female patient's room (she might have her clothes off for a sponge bath). Therefore, Itami stood in the corridor and called out to Kurokawa and Kuribayashi, "I brought your stuff, girls."

Kurokawa opened the door just as the doctor began drawing blood from an arm. Itami was treated to the sight of a needle piercing soft flesh. Kuribayashi was standing by the side, and she looked away as though she were the one being poked by the needle. Itami was also the sort who would look away during injections. He didn't want to watch, but...

There were enough blood tubes in the kidney dish to make him wonder how many CCs of blood they needed for tests.

He could understand why they needed to run so many tests; after all, they had to protect against infection, parasites, all sorts of poisons, and many other unknown hazards. However, if they took this much blood, he could not help

but think that even healthy people would get anemia.

One needed a fair bit of physical strength to withstand medical examinations. It would be a bad joke if people got hurt while receiving a medical checkup. Itami noticed that Noriko's face was pale even as she lay on the bed.

Itami said, "Feeling better?" to Noriko as he handed Kurokawa and Kuribayashi's things to their owners. Itami's nonchalant attitude calmed Noriko down, and she replied, "I feel good."

To Noriko, Itami was her favorite of the three JSDF troopers who had rescued her.

"Kurokawa, will Mochizuki-san be staying here?"

"Yes, she will. Even at the fastest pace, the tests will still take a couple of weeks to complete, so you'd best be prepared for it." Kurokawa answered as she saw the white-clad nurse pick up the kidney dish.

Among those tests were blood tests, blood chemistry tests, X-ray scans, urine tests, pap smears, endoscopies, EEG scans, ECG scans, ultrasound scans, pregnancy tests, and so on. While a simple test could be completed in less than a day, the sheer amount of tests being conducted meant that one would need to wait for up to two weeks for the results to come in.

“Is that so... Well, you’ve come all the way here, so you’re almost home anyway. Just take it easy and wait.”

“I don’t mind that... but I’d like to call my parents and tell them I’m fine.”

Itami saw that Kuribayashi was reaching for her mobile phone. He stopped her with a look, and then said loudly, “Ah, sorry about that. They haven’t set up civilian lines yet. Also, they’ll need to run a lot of tests on you before you go through the Gate and back to Ginza, so you’ll need to wait a while before you can phone home. Plus, if stern people like us contact your folks, they might be frightened. So let the suits — that is, Sugawara and his people — handle that.”

Itami put his hands together with an apologetic look on his face.

Since Itami was begging her pardon like this, all she could do was grin and bear it.

Then, the nurse took out a paper cup and said, “The next test is...” and then Noriko headed for the restroom. Itami took this chance to drag Kuribayashi and Kurokawa into the hallways and explain what he had heard about Noriko’s family.

“...Therefore, you can only bring up her family when the doctors and counsellors give the green light. Understood?”

Kurokawa had a pained expression on her face, and she couldn't speak. Kuribayashi patted the pocket with her cell phone and whispered, "That was close..."

"Yeah, it scared me too. All because of your phone."

After a while, the nurse brought Noriko out of her ward. Noriko padded across the floor in her treatment center slippers.

Itami said, "Then, we'll come by if anything happens." Of course, that was just being polite. As a nurse, Kurokawa had a chance to keep taking care of Mochizuki, but Itami and Kuribayashi probably would not see her again after this. Noriko understood this, but she still bowed to them.

"Thank you very much."

It was easy to tell that she was brought up well by loving parents, and she would not embarrass herself anywhere she went.

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After the day's work was done, the base flag was lowered, and the bugle for that ceremony told the JSDF troopers to stop whatever they were doing.

Anyone who could see the flag had to salute it. Anyone who did not would have to stand at attention where they were. After the bugle finished playing, they returned to their own activities.

At this point, a lot of people would take their basins and bathing products to the bathhouse (sadly, there were no showers in the Special Region) to bathe, or they would head to the canteen for dinner. Others would polish their boots, wash and iron their clothes, repair any holes in their uniforms or read books or the like to pass the time.

Basically, they were free to do whatever they wanted until it was time for lights-out.

Itami headed for Arnus Town's canteen, having been invited for a drink by Yanagida.

They had only been gone for a few days, but there was a big change in the ALC's canteen.

The ceiling was extended outward, so a little rain would not be a problem. And then there were more tables. The amount of staff both inside and outside the kitchen increased to deal with the additional customers.

The homey atmosphere of the place brought more and more customers in.

Still, when Delilah saw Itami, she ran over and greeted him cheerfully. “Yo, boss, welcome back!” As they heard her say that, the other residents who knew Itami greeted him as well, and told their friends who did not know Itami about him.

“Welcome back, Boss Itami!”

The people here were nice. The contrast between the constant hostility of Akusho made the lively atmosphere of Arnus that much more welcoming.

“Oi, how come there’re so many people here?”

Yanagida looked annoyed. But why would he not be? After all, he was looking at the entirety of 3rd Recon behind Itami.

“Lieutenant Yanagida, I believe you said it was your treat?”

After 3rd Recon took two tables for themselves, Itami shouted, “Hey onee-chan! 12 beers please!” to which the response was “~Kay!” Then everyone began digging into their food and drinks.

“Oi, oi, oi, Itami, what’s this all about?”

“As expected of First Lieutenant Yanagida, how generous of you. Guys, go easy on him!”

“Give me a break,” Yanagida muttered as he took out his wallet and double-checked the number of people present.

Even if things in the Special Region were cheap, beer for 12 would still cost a pretty penny. Kuwabara and Nishina smiled bitterly as they saw the younger people ordering expensive drinks.

The old Dwarf on the adjacent table laughed coarsely as he rapped on the head of the person next to him, while the PX shop girls chatted cheerfully.

Everyone was either eating, drinking, or talking amidst this commotion. Then, Yanagida began listening to Itami talk about what was not written in his report.

After he was done, there was a brief pause. Then it was Yanagida’s turn to speak.

“Itami, while you were gone, an interesting person came by.”

“Looking for me?”

“Your team are the Men in Green, right? And you’re their leader.”

Itami knew about the stories which the refugees of Coda Village had spread, and he had benefited greatly from them. The fact was that everyone on this street showed a great deal of respect to Itami, not simply because of his rank, but because of those stories.

“Then, what did they want me for?”

“They want you to slay a Flame Dragon.”

“Ehhh... a Dragon? That’s impossible, right? We can’t take on a monster like that.”

“Well, the thing is that we can’t do anything because of the location of the place, but there’s also many other reasons why we can’t help.”

Yanagida went on to describe how the girl called Yao met with General Hazama to request that he help exterminate the Flame Dragon, and how Hazama had refused his help because the Dragon was not in Imperial territory. Then there was how Yao went to all the other JSDF officers and tearfully begged them to save her home and her people.

“Well, that’s a pain.”

“Is that what you think?”

“But it the brass says we can’t, then we can’t, right?”

“Well, that’s true. But the Elbe Kingdom is to the south, and they seem to have crude oil there. And the girl called Yao had a huge uncut diamond with her. Now that was a pretty sight.”

Yanagida’s hands cupped the air like he was holding an invisible watermelon, to show the size of the diamond.

Something felt wrong about the topic. Itami focused himself and went on his guard.

“And?” Why was she looking for him? What did she have in mind?

“Won’t you go take a look? Like I told you earlier, if you go as a prospector, you can move around freely. Then, by the time you find those resources, you’re already across the border. Then you encounter the Flame Dragon, so you have to take action. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“It is a problem! A big one!”

Itami slammed the table as he rose.

“Don’t talk about that battle so lightly! That Dragon’s pretty damn scary, you know!”

As Itami shouted, everyone became quiet. The people in the canteen wondered what was happening.

“What’s wrong, el-tee?”

Itami lowered his voice as he answered Kurata.

“What he means is that he wants us to bring down the Dragon.”

The members of 3rd Recon were unable to speak. They had beaten the Flame Dragon back once, but they did not think they could do it a second time.

“What if we prepared 100 LAMs and volley-fired them?

Itami ignored Katsumoto’s joke and looked straight at Yanagida.

“You’re basically telling half of them to go and die, just like the refugees.”

There were many casualties when the Flame Dragon attacked the people fleeing Coda Village.

The reason why 3rd Recon had not taken any losses back then was because the refugees occupied the Dragon's attention. They could easily imagine what would happen if they took the Flame Dragon head-on.

"If it's an order, I'll obey it. But if I can refuse, I will. I don't want to die and I don't want them to die either."

Yanagida shrugged and replied, "Really now?" as if Itami's words were not worth listening to.

"Still, I know you'll do it. I can predict it. Don't worry, I'll take care of the paperwork for you."

"Why do I have to go?"

"Who knows?"

Yanagida said, "Well then," and picked up the bill.

"It can't be helped. Tonight is my treat. Well, just think of it as an apology."

"An apology?"

Yanagida raised his right hand to the surprised Itami and walked off. But before leaving, he said one more thing.

“Go check up on the blonde Elf girl.”

## Afterword

I want to thank everyone who read GATE: Thus the JSDF Fought Here, Vol. 2: Flame Dragon (1st half). Also, I welcome all new readers. In any case, allow me to assume that everyone here has read the first volume before going on with this afterword.

How did everyone find the first half of the Flame Dragon arc?

The unfortunate Dark Elf girl Yao has made her debut. Itami's life will certainly be more interesting now. When I was planning Gate, the only girls I had in mind who could make Itami's life miserable were Tuka and Yao.

My first conception was that Itami would travel the world with a pair of gold and silver-haired Elves and have lots of adventures. Later on, when I started planning Yao, her personality was as dark as her skin, being greedy and vicious, which would give Itami headaches. Her preferred weapon was a whip.

But when I started writing, I could not do it. Yao said, "I'm not an evil woman! I don't want this! Please don't make me play that role!" so I replied:

Yanai: "You're a Dark Elf, right? Since you're about the same age as Tuka, giving you a wicked personality would make you more charming."

Yao: "But the impression of Dark Elves as evil is wrong to begin with! We're

just a bit more calculative and ruthless when it comes to achieving our goals. And I'm an honest girl to begin with... \*sob\*”

Well, when she cried like that, I could not help but be moved.

Yanai: “All right, I’ll change the script. But that means, no matter what role you play, you can’t complain. A big change like this isn’t easy to make.”

Yao: As long as I don’t play an evil character who steals, cheats, rapes and murders. I’ll be fine.”

Perhaps these words were a fatal mistake. After that the character I wrote was the onee-san type Dark Elf, Yao Ha Ducy.

Yanai: “Well, what’s wrong? Granted you’re still dark-skinned, but what’s wrong with the part?”

Yao: “The color’s the same, but why am I so unlucky? My friend even NTRed me!”

Yanai: “Well, you said you didn’t want to be a villain, so I made you a victim. Or would the original way have been better?

Yao: “.....”

Well, it is a little sad. She's a good girl, so everyone, please give her your support.

Yanai Takumi.